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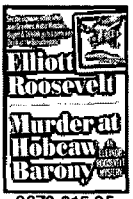

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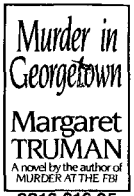

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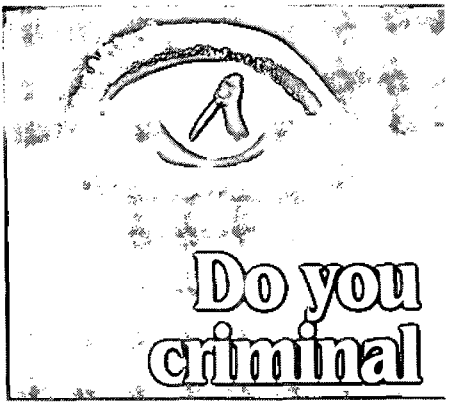

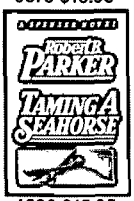

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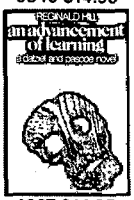

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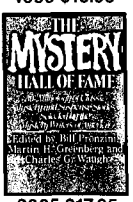

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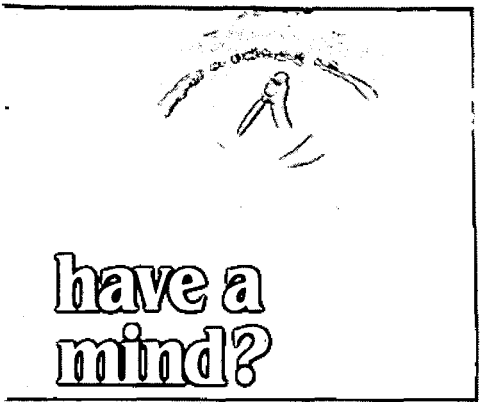

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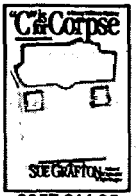

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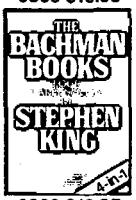

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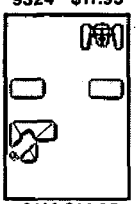
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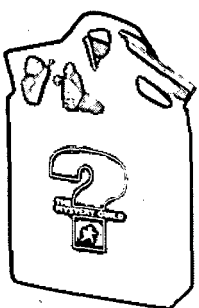

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DETECTIVERSE

LESSON IN ARITHMETIC

by PEDRO J. SAAVEDRA

I'm told of a burglar named Nick,
Who when given his choices would pick
The worthless to steal
But got paid on the deal—
Which I find a remarkable trick.

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a ***NEW*** **Nick Velvet story by**

EDWARD D. HOCH

The farm was about ninety miles from Windsor, Ontario, near London. Nick found it without too much difficulty and pulled into the driveway through a dusting of fresh snow. A fenced-in area to the right held a pair of hunting dogs that set up a commotion at his arrival. He climbed out of the car, but before he could close the door he saw a young woman in the doorway holding a rifle pointed in his direction.

"This is private property!" she called out. "Just get back in your car and keep driving, mister!"

THE THEFT OF McGREGOR'S SKUNK

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet first heard the name of Harvest McGregor from the man who hired him to steal McGregor's skunk. They were dining together at a restaurant in Windsor, Ontario, just across the border from Detroit, and Gerald Anka had just mentioned the skunk for the first time.

"I don't know," Nick said doubtfully. "Sometimes I have trouble with animals."

Gerald Anka, a small man with carefully controlled emotions, answered, "I was told you'd successfully stolen a tiger, a cat, some ravens, a camel, and a horse."

"The horse was made of wood and came from a merry-go-round. That doesn't count. It's true I've stolen a few animals in my day, but never as a regular thing. Animals can present problems, and a skunk could present the worst problems of all. How do I get close

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enough to grab him without getting sprayed? How do I make a getaway when everyone can smell him a mile away? Skunks often carry rabies, too."

Gerald Anka held up a hand. "If you want an extra five thousand above your usual fee, I'm willing to pay it."

Nick thought about it, but not too long. Business had been slow since the first of the year, perhaps because potential customers were likely to have gone south for the winter. "How soon do you need it done?"

"This week."

"Is the skunk here in Windsor?"

"About ninety miles away, on a farm near London."

"Will this McGregor be expecting trouble?"

"I don't think so, but the place is well guarded with a security fence and a sophisticated alarm system. Here's half the money in advance. I'll meet you back here on Sunday with the rest of it. And you'll have the skunk, all right?"

"Yes," Nick promised.

"Good." Anka got up to leave.

"One more thing—is Harvest McGregor male or female?"

"Oh—female," Anka said. "Very much female."

That evening Nick phoned Gloria at home. "I've got a job," he told her. "It'll take me the rest of the week."

"What is it, Nicky?"

"A skunk."

"What?"

"A skunk."

"That's what I thought you said. Why would anybody want—"

"You know I don't ask questions, Gloria, so long as it's nothing of value. Take care of yourself. I'll see you next Monday."

"Be careful, Nicky."

In the morning, he drove his rented car northeast along route 401, keeping within the speed limit as a lazy January snowfall drifted down over the countryside. The highway, the MacDonald Cartier Freeway, ran across Ontario almost to Montreal. Near London, he took an exit into a pattern of country roads.

He found the McGregor farm without much difficulty and pulled into the driveway through a dusting of fresh snow. A fenced-in area to the right held a pair of hunting dogs, German shorthairs, that

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set up a commotion at his arrival. He climbed out of the car, but before he could close the door he saw a young woman in the doorway holding a rifle pointed in his direction.

"This is private property!" she called out. "I'm not in the market for anything, and I don't answer surveys! Just get back in your car and keep driving, mister!"

Nick smiled and walked slowly toward her, showing his empty hands. "If you're Miss Harvest McGregor, I've driven a long way to see you. I'm Nicholas Velvet from the Ontario Fish and Wildlife Commission."

She lowered the rifle until it was pointed at the steps by her feet. "What do you want with me now?" she asked. "Is it the dogs again?"

"Not this time," he said with a smile. "We have a report that you're keeping a skunk here on the property."

She groaned. "Was it Earl Dusted who complained? I never knew such a busybody neighbor!" She stepped aside to let him enter the house. She was a woman in her mid-twenties with the fresh flush of youth and the outdoors still in her cheeks. The jeans and flannel shirt she wore hinted at a slim, firm body.

"You live here alone?" Nick asked, glancing around at the field-stone fireplace and handsome colonial furniture. On the mantel was a hinged triptych for three photographs. The middle one showed an older, parental couple. On the left was Harvest, but the right side was empty.

"I've been alone since my brother Tom died last fall."

"I see you have quite a few animals. The dogs—"

"I have a small boarding kennel. I started it and Tom worked with me when he came back from overseas."

"What about the skunk?" Nick asked, taking out his notebook, acting the role of a kindly but persistent civil servant.

"He was Tom's, too. We call him Skipper. You can see him if you want."

Nick followed her out the back door and down a fenced-in dog run, noting that the fences, at least, were not wired for alarms. At the end was another enclosure, also without an alarm system. For a moment Nick thought it was empty except for a couple of logs and some underbrush, then he saw the little bundle of black-and-white fur huddled among some dead leaves. "Is he sleeping?" Nick asked.

"Skunks are mainly nocturnal, especially as far as hunting goes, but Skipper is sometimes active during the day. He's a fine pet—and you can see he's treated well."

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"I believe pet skunks are generally descented," Nick said.

"That's true, but my brother always considered that unnatural. Skipper only sprays if he's molested by strangers or other animals. He's never bothered me." As if to prove her point, she unlocked the enclosure and went in to join Skipper. The skunk came awake and seemed pleased to see her. He was a playful little animal, accepting bits of food from her fingers and nestling into her arms. Nick could see nothing that would make him the least bit valuable to Gerald Anka or anyone else. If the skunk was wearing a diamond-studded collar, it was well hidden.

"Could I hold him?" Nick asked.

"I wouldn't advise it," Harvest said. "He once sprayed a visitor who tried to pet him, and she had to throw her clothes away."

The skunk was about three feet long including his tail, and the black fur of his body was broken only by the white V-shaped stripe along the top of his back. "What does he eat?" Nick asked, edging closer.

"Rats, mice, chipmunks, insects. I feed him fruit and berries, too. He's very well cared for. You should be able to see that."

"I can," Nick agreed. "On the basis of my observations I'd say the complaint was totally unfounded."

"Good." She placed Skipper back on one of the logs and locked the door of the pen after her. Turning to Nick with a smile she asked, "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"That would taste good."

Back in the house while the coffee was brewing, she asked, "It was Dusted who complained, wasn't it?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. Which neighbors are they?"

"That white house on the hill." She pointed up the road in the direction from which Nick had come. "Tom had a lot of trouble with Earl Dusted over the property line back in the woods."

"Enough trouble that you greet strangers with a rifle?"

Harvest McGregor swept the hair from her eyes. "I don't want any more accidents like the one that killed Tom."

"What happened to him?"

"He was back in the woods, sawing a dead tree. It fell the wrong way and killed him."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Was there anything suspicious about his death?"

She shook her head, apparently not wanting to pursue the subject, and Nick accepted the coffee she handed him. His curiosity made

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him ask one more question. "You mentioned your brother was overseas. Was he employed over there?"

She frowned before replying. "Why do you ask?"

He shrugged. "Just making conversation, maybe."

"He was a junior member of the Canadian diplomatic corps, assigned to our embassy in Paris. He left the service shortly before his death."

"That's when he came back here to help you and acquired Skipper as a pet?"

She nodded. "Funny—once he spoke of him as his life insurance, but Skipper couldn't save him when the tree fell the wrong way."

Nick finished his coffee and got to his feet. "I'm sure there'll be no problem with your keeping Skipper, Miss McGregor. Thank you for your cooperation."

"It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Velvet."

Nick went out to his car and headed back the way he had come. The light snow had stopped and the afternoon sun was breaking through in the western sky.

Darkness came early in January, and when Nick returned to the area of Harvest McGregor's house shortly after six it already seemed like the middle of the night. He parked near the white house on the hill and set off across the field he'd observed earlier that afternoon. He wasn't yet prepared to steal the skunk, but he wanted to see if a route to the farm from this direction was feasible. It had been obvious from the beginning that the direct approach wouldn't work. Harvest was too alert and too ready to lift her rifle, and he didn't doubt for an instant that she'd shoot anyone she detected fooling around the pens and kennels at the rear of the house.

Nick estimated he'd covered about half the distance to her place and was just entering a stand of pine trees when someone challenged him from the darkness. "Hold it there, fella—I've got a shotgun here and I can see pretty well in the dark. I got no use for trespassers."

"I'm no trespasser," Nick answered evenly. "My car broke down—I was looking for a phone."

The man in the darkness gave a harsh laugh. "Think you'd find it on one of them trees? Come out here where I can get a look at you."

Both of them stepped together from the shadow of the trees and in the moonlight Nick found himself facing a bearded man wearing a hunting jacket and cap. The light groundcover of snow brightened

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the scene enough so that he could make out the name *Earl* stitched above the pocket on the man's jacket. He assumed it was Earl Dusted, Harvest McGregor's troublesome neighbor. "If you live around here, I'd appreciate the use of a phone," Nick said, sticking to his story.

Earl merely motioned with his shotgun. "Go on, get outta here before I fill you with buckshot."

Nick started back toward the road, trying to look dejected. It wasn't hard. The man's shotgun effectively cut off his intended route to the McGregor house. He'd have to think of something else.

The following morning Nick was up early, finishing breakfast at the London motel before nine o'clock and driving into the center of town to visit a veterinarian he'd chosen at random from the phone-book. The man proved to be a white-haired family-doctor type named Philip Graze. His first words to Nick were, "Dog or cat?"

"What?"

"Dog or cat? Which one is your problem? Our dog hospital is filled to overflowing right now and I couldn't take on another one."

"It's neither," Nick told him. "It's a skunk."

"Descented?"

"No."

"Then I couldn't treat it. Having something like that around would upset the other animals—to say nothing of the staff."

"I'm not asking you to treat it, Dr. Graze. I just want to ask your advice, which I'm willing to pay for."

A dog started barking from out back. "A patient calls," the doctor said with a smile. "I'll be right back."

He was true to his word and settled down behind his desk. "Now tell me about your problem."

"I want to tranquilize it."

Dr. Graze appraised him. "Had any experience with a tranquilizer gun?"

"I used one on a tiger years ago."

The veterinarian raised his eyebrows. "Use the same one on an animal as small as a skunk and you'll have a corpse on your hands. The dosage in tranquilizer darts is figured by body weight. That's why they're used mainly for larger animals. For dogs, cats, squirrels, and skunks a net is far more effective."

"How do you get a net over a skunk without being sprayed?"

"I'm afraid that's your problem, Mr. —"

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"Velour."

"—Mr. Velour. I can't imagine why you want to get that close to this skunk. They're often rabid, you know."

"There's no way a skunk could be approached? Maybe with a gas mask—"

"It would still spray your clothes. You might get the skunk, but he'd get you first."

Nick had been afraid of that. Even if he wore clothes he immediately discarded, enough of the scent might linger to make him an easy target for pursuing police. "Suppose I tricked the skunk into using up its spray. Doesn't it take a while for it to replenish its supply?"

Dr. Graze shook his head. "If necessary, a skunk can spray several times in rapid succession."

"Then I seem to have an impossible problem," Nick decided.

"Exactly what is your problem?"

"I'm supposed to remove a skunk from a pen without attracting attention."

The veterinarian sat up. "You want to steal a skunk, and you're asking my advice?"

"I wouldn't put it like that."

"I should get the police on you," Graze said. But he made no move to reach for the telephone. Instead he took a cigar from a box on his desk and carefully lit it. "What you need," he said slowly, "is a great horned owl."

"Why an owl?"

"Because the great horned owl, as far as we know, is the only creature not deterred by skunk spray. A great horned owl could probably steal a skunk, if it had a mind to."

Nick thought about it—and the doctor's puzzling behavior. "Go on."

"This skunk isn't in a zoo or a pet shop, or he'd have been descented. You're planning to steal it from someone, but if it's not descented it must be kept outdoors. Am I correct?"

"Maybe," Nick admitted.

"Then a great horned owl might do the trick."

"Where would I find one?"

Dr. Graze smiled. "It so happens that I have one. It was brought to me about a year ago, suffering a slight wound from a hunting arrow. I nursed it back to health and wound up adopting it for a pet."

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"You're telling me this owl will swoop down and carry the skunk away in its claws?"

"Before I answer that, I'd like to show you around our facility, Mr. Velour."

The veterinarian got to his feet and Nick followed him down the corridor to the overcrowded kennel where the dogs were kept, then on to the cats and ferrets and other small animals. There were even some birds twittering in their cages. "I can see you're very crowded," Nick said.

"I need money for expansion," Graze told him. "The bank is willing to make me a loan, but I need a few thousand dollars right now. I can't wait for the red tape of a bank loan."

Nick was beginning to think Dr. Graze was as much of a thief as he was. He couldn't decide whether it was good luck or bad that had brought them together. "Let's have a look at this remarkable owl," he said.

Dr. Graze and his wife lived in a modest country home at the opposite end of town from the McGregor place. Nick's immediate impression was of a virtual Noah's ark, with animals everywhere. There were a half dozen dogs, at least three cats, a number of caged birds—and a tank of tropical fish that seemed to be the special province of Iris Graze.

She was somewhat younger than her husband—a flighty, birdlike woman who seemed to feel an apology was needed for the zoolike appearance of the house. "I wish Philip had warned me he was bringing someone home. At least I could have picked up the doggie toys."

"Think nothing of it, Mrs. Graze. I'm used to it."

"Do you have pets yourself?"

"Nothing like this," Nick equivocated, sidestepping a large black cat that seemed upset by his presence.

"We'll be out in back, Iris," the doctor told her.

"You're not going to let that beast loose, I hope."

"Just for a minute, to stretch his wings."

Outside, the previous night's snow had mostly melted beneath the morning sun. Graze led the way to a large coop on stilts and opened the door.

"He's so big!" Nick said.

"Wait till you see him fly. He doesn't like being disturbed in the daytime, though."

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The great horned owl lifted its tufted ears and gave a deep, booming hoot. Then it stretched its wings and took off, gliding across the yard and back. "How big is he?" Nick asked with genuine awe.

"His wingspread is five feet, perhaps a little more. Now do you doubt he could pick up a skunk with his claws?"

"I don't know."

"They regularly hunt fish, reptiles, hares, dogs, poultry—even porcupines. I could train him to bring back a skunk in one afternoon."

"In exchange for a donation."

Dr. Graze smiled. "We understand one another."

"One thing I should ask you first. Are you familiar with the various kennels in the area?"

"We don't have more than a handful. I think I know them all."

"Then you must know Harvest McGregor's place. And her brother Tom."

Dr. Graze held the coop door wide and allowed the owl to glide into its darkened refuge. "Not personally, but of course Tom was a local celebrity."

"In what way?"

"Last summer he helped a Russian spy to defect. It must have made the American papers."

"Refresh my memory."

"Well, Tom was in the diplomatic corps, assigned to the Canadian embassy in Paris. He met a Russian named Kazakov, who claimed to have important information regarding Soviet infiltration into your American CIA. McGregor helped him defect to Canada, and Kazakov stayed here with the McGregors a few days before leaving to meet with the Americans. But he suffered a heart attack at a Toronto hotel and died before crossing the border."

"Convenient," Nick murmured.

"Many people thought he'd been murdered to keep him from talking, but it was never proven. A few months later, last fall, McGregor himself was killed by a falling tree. His sister didn't tell anyone until after the funeral. She said she was sick of the press nosing around. I'm told she still greets strangers with a loaded rifle."

Nick nodded absently, remembering Harvest's remark that the skunk was her brother's insurance. Now he'd been hired to steal it, and he wondered which side was paying him.

They worked with the owl, whose name was Rusty, most of the

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afternoon. Graze used a black fur muff to substitute for the skunk, and the owl swooped down on it time and again. Unfortunately, he wouldn't take it with his claws.

"He knows it's not alive," Dr. Graze explained. "With a real skunk there'll be no problem."

"What's to prevent him from tearing the skunk apart the minute he gets it in his claws?"

The white-haired vet look surprised. "Nothing. You didn't tell me you wanted the animal alive."

"I want him alive."

"If he comes out alive, he comes out squirting. That won't bother Rusty, but it'll sure bother us."

"Then what do we do?"

Graze thought about it for some minutes, pacing up and down. Finally he told Nick, "Rusty will put him to sleep and you can go in after him. How's that?"

"You told me a tranquilizer dart might kill him."

"I'm not talking about darts. I'm talking about ether."

After dark they drove together to a point near Harvest McGregor's farm, approaching from the opposite direction so Nick would risk no more encounters with Earl Dusted and his shotgun. Dr. Graze carried his owl in a large box from which could be heard occasional rustling and more than one irritated hoot. Finally the farmhouse came into view and they could see the pen where the skunk was kept.

Graze nodded. "I figured you might be bringing me here. Harvest McGregor would be one to keep a skunk."

"It's in that pen."

"Then we'd better not get any closer." Nick stopped the car and looked inquiringly at the veterinarian. "Rusty will go the rest of the way." Graze took a bottle of ether from his pocket and carefully loosened the stopper. A string attached to the neck of the bottle went around the owl's claws.

"Are you sure this will work?" Nick asked.

"No. I've never tried it before. But I do have Rusty trained to do certain things on command." He patted the owl's feathers, whispered a few words to him, and let him go.

Nick watched the great wings unfurl as the bird was airborne, carrying the bottle of ether beneath its claws. It swooped low over

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the enclosure and in the dim moonlight Nick thought he saw the skunk down in its pen rise up into a spraying position.

Dr. Graze, also watching intently, chose that moment to blow a small whistle. Rusty released his hold on the string and the bottle of ether fell to the ground, shattering on some unseen stone. "Guess I didn't have to worry about loosening that stopper," the vet whispered. "Come on!"

Nick followed a bit reluctantly, weighing the possibility of being squirted by Skipper against the likelihood of being overcome by ether fumes. As they reached the fence, Rusty was still circling overhead. Nick took wire-cutters from his belt. "Can you see the skunk?" he asked Graze. "I don't smell anything."

"That means the ether got to him before he could spray. We're in luck."

Covering their noses against the ether, the two men advanced through the fence and across the pen. "There he is," Nick said, spotting a bundle of black-and-white fur.

Graze scooped the sleeping skunk carefully into a burlap bag. "Let's go," he said.

"What about Rusty?"

"He'll follow us back to the van."

They hurried across the frozen ground, with Nick casting apprehensive glances in the direction of the Dusted place. But no one seemed to have heard or spotted them. At the van, he took the bag while the great horned owl came in for a landing on a nearby branch. Graze coaxed him into the box and opened the van door. "Give him an extra mouse for me when you feed him next," Nick suggested.

"Freeze or you're dead!" a tense voice commanded, and they were staring into a rifle held firmly in the hands of Harvest McGregor.

Dr. Graze almost dropped the box. Clutching the burlap bag more tightly, Nick said, "I didn't expect we'd meet again so soon."

"Mr. Velvet, isn't it?" Harvest said, training her rifle on the center of his chest.

"Velvet?" Graze repeated. "I thought your name was Velour."

"We can talk this over," Nick told Harvest McGregor.

"We can," she agreed, "while we're waiting for the police. What have you done to Skipper?"

"He's all right."

"Walk ahead of me, both of you. We're going back to the house.

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You must have been foolish to think I wouldn't have an alarm system."

"There's no alarm on the fence," Nick said.

"I have trip wires in the woods. You hit two of them before you ever reached the fence. I'd have shot you then, but I wanted to see how you did it. I need to be on guard for next time."

"Why not shoot us now?" Nick asked, his taunt bringing a gasp from Dr. Graze.

"I want to know which side you're on first."

"American or Russian, you mean? I couldn't tell you," Nick answered honestly. "I was hired to steal a skunk."

"By whom?"

"His name's not important."

She motioned with the gun as they entered the house. "Put the bag on the table and stand over by the wall."

"What have you gotten me into?" Graze asked Nick. "I left Rusty out there on the path by the van. What if someone comes along and steals him, or lets him loose?"

"That's not likely," Nick said, his eyes on Harvest as she opened the burlap bag, her rifle still trained in their direction, and slid the sleeping animal out of the bag.

"He's perfectly all right," Dr. Graze hastened to assure her. "He just inhaled a bit of ether."

"I saw that owl of yours. I almost shot it!"

Nick stepped a little closer. She was rubbing the skunk's stomach and he caught a glimpse of a portion of skin that had been shaved smooth. "What's that?"

"Stay back!"

"I just want a look. There's something tattooed on the skin. Is it a name?"

"No." She hesitated. "It's a number. Tom had it done before he died."

"His insurance."

"I swear I don't know what it means! But no one else is getting it."

Nick could see the number now—nine digits, separated by dashes. 110-82-2858. "Did anyone ever ask you about it?"

"No. They came with a lot of questions after his accident—the Canadian police and some Americans—but I never told them a thing. The number didn't save Tom's life, but it might save mine."

"Then you can't call the police," Nick reasoned.

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"What?"

"If you tell the police we tried to steal that skunk because of a number tattooed on its skin, everyone's going to know about it."

"Obviously the people who hired you already do."

"If you tell the police, the other side will know, too. You'll have twice as many people after it."

"Which side killed my brother?"

"You don't believe it was an accident?"

"Not any more."

"How long has Earl Dusted lived on the next farm?"

Harvest thought. "A year or so, I think."

"He was living there when your brother died?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"He prowls around the woods at night with a shotgun."

"He's not the one who hired you?"

"No."

She motioned the rifle at Dr. Graze. "What about you?"

"I'm an innocent bystander," he assured her. "My name is Philip Graze. You must know of my veterinary service."

"I've heard your name. You could lose your license for what you did here tonight. How long will Skipper be unconscious?"

"Not long. The ether wasn't applied directly to his nose. He got just enough of the fumes to knock him out."

"I'm glad you were so thoughtful," Harvest said sarcastically. Though she still stood near the telephone, Nick felt the moment had passed when she might have called the police. He took advantage of the lessened tension to suggest, "How about this, Miss McGregor? Let me deliver the skunk as I'd planned. That should enable me to find out—"

"It'll enable you to collect your fee, Mr. Velvet. You don't care about me and my problems." Before she could continue, the doorbell rang, followed by the pounding of a fist against the door.

"Open up, please," a voice called out. "It's the police!"

Harvest almost smiled. "Summoned by the nosy Mr. Dusted, no doubt. Finally doing something useful for a change." She walked to the door, holding the rifle loosely in one hand. She'd barely begun to open the door when it was shoved forward, catching her in the chest. She staggered backward and the first man into the room easily twisted the rifle from her grasp.

The second man to enter was Nick's client, Gerald Anka, and he held a silenced Ingram submachine gun pointed at them . . .

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"I figured you were having a little trouble," Anka told Nick. "We came along to help."

"You could help by putting away that weapon," Nick told him.

"Don't worry," Anka said, his eyes roaming the room.

"Who is this man?" Harvest demanded.

Anka spotted the skunk. "That's what we want, Freddy. Go get it."

He turned back to Nick. "I hired you to avoid this sort of confrontation. I don't want violence. But when we saw what happened, I figured she'd brought you in here to call the police."

"You were watching me?"

Anka nodded. "This was too big to leave entirely in your hands, Velvet."

Nick reflected. "The name of a Russian mole deep inside the CIA. The name that Kazakov brought with him when he defected. Kazakov died, or was murdered, before he could bargain the name for a new life in America, but he'd given it to his Canadian friend, Tom McGregor. I don't understand why McGregor didn't hand it over, though."

Harvest spoke from across the room. "My brother was convinced one side or the other had murdered Kazakov—either the Russians, to prevent the disclosure of the mole's identity, or the CIA, to keep the story out of the press. He was afraid of giving the name to the wrong side, so he gave it to no one. He tattooed it on Skipper instead."

The man named Freddy was holding the skunk in his hands. "There's no name here. It's a number."

"A cipher," Anka suggested, peering at it. "They'll know how to decode it in Washington."

"You can't take Skipper," Harvest insisted, moving forward.

Anka raised his gun. "We'll see that he's returned to you." For the first time he acknowledged Dr. Graze's presence. "Who's this? The man with the owl?"

"I hired him to help me steal Skipper," Nick explained.

"You killed my brother!" Harvest told Gerald Anka. "And Kazakov—you killed him, too! Kazakov was the only other person who knew about the skunk. You got the information out of him somehow, possibly with drugs. Tom told me the one who came for the skunk would be the killer."

"Your brother was a wise man," Anka said. "A pity he died so young." He unlocked the bolt of the Ingram, and Nick suddenly realized he meant to kill them all.

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"Damn!" Freddy shouted. "This skunk's awake!"

He tried to keep a grip on the writhing ball of fur, and that was a mistake. Skipper let loose a foul-smelling spray directly into his face. Freddy screamed and dropped the skunk as Nick pushed Graze out of the way and dove for Harvest.

Anka fired a short burst from the Ingram above their heads, leaving a line of bullet holes across the wall. He lowered the weapon for another burst but the skunk spray must have stung his eyes. He turned and flung open the door. There was the sudden boom of a shotgun and he was thrown back into the room, clutching his shattered chest as the Ingram clattered to the floor.

Earl Dusted came in quickly, stepping over Anka's body to aim at the second man. But Freddy was holding both hands to his face, the fight gone out of him.

"You're just in time," Nick said, covering his nose against the fetid odor of skunk. He picked himself up from the floor and asked, "Would I be correct in welcoming you back from the dead, Mr. McGregor?"

The police were summoned to remove Anka's body and take Freddy into custody. The skunk odor in the house was unbearable, so they adjourned down the road to the Dusted house, where Harvest and her brother explained what had happened.

"It was my idea, I suppose," Harvest told the local police lieutenant while Nick and Dr. Graze made up an attentive audience. "When Tom arrived from Paris with Kazakov, he tattooed that number onto Skipper's skin. Then Kazakov died, supposedly of a heart attack. But Tom was told the autopsy showed the presence of several drugs in the body, including a type of truth serum. Kazakov was at my house when Skipper was tattooed, and Tom feared the killers would come after us next. He was afraid to go to the CIA because he wasn't certain which side had disposed of Kazakov."

She paused. "I could see the day-to-day waiting was wearing him down. We had no other family and his close friends were still overseas. I suggested we make up a story he'd been killed by a falling tree and I'd held a small, unannounced funeral. He grew a beard to change his appearance and moved into this vacant house we owned, becoming the mysterious Earl Dusted. He guarded me, and we laid a trap for the killers. But I guess we didn't fool you, Mr. Velvet."

"You fooled me for a while," Nick told her. "But I was bothered by that three-sided picture-frame in your living room. There were

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pictures of you and your parents in it, but the third one was missing. Why had it been removed? Why was there no photograph of your brother? So visitors to the house wouldn't know what he looked like? I began to wonder if he might be alive, hiding somewhere. When I encountered Dusted prowling the woods with a shotgun, it seemed to me he was either stalking you or guarding you. When he arrived tonight and killed Anka, I knew he was guarding you and guessed he might be your brother Tom."

"This Anka hired you to steal the skunk?" Tom McGregor asked.

Nick nodded. "I had no idea why until I saw the number."

"But who was Anka?" Dr. Graze demanded. "Russian or CIA?"

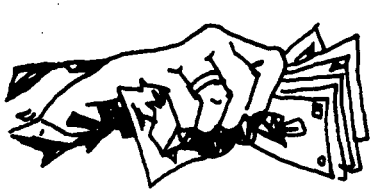
"Almost certainly Russian," Nick said. "Remember his first reaction to that number? He thought it might be a cipher. Most Americans, told that a number is the basis for identification, and shown a number consisting of three digits, a hyphen, two digits, another hyphen, and four digits, would think of only one thing—a social-security number. The Russians wouldn't be as quick to think of this. But that's what it is, isn't it? The social-security number of the Soviet spy who's been planted in the CIA for all these years?"

"That's it," McGregor said. "It seemed safer than tattooing his name. And now I'm ready to give it to the proper authorities. Kazakov's defection will have served its purpose at last."

"I have to go and feed Skipper," Harvest said.

"And I have to get my owl back home," Dr. Graze said. "Velour, Velvet, whatever your name is—it's been an adventure. But I wouldn't want one like it too often."

It had been an adventure for Nick, too. Somehow he didn't even mind that he'd only collected the first half of his fee. He'd have to think about that.



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a *NEW* short story by

MARGARET YORKE

Mrs. Frobisher read magazines, and romantic novels she borrowed from the library without Mr. Frobisher's knowledge. And she watched television, too, until late at night. She had formed an attachment in her mind to a handsome middle-aged actor who featured in many plays. He often played rather sinister roles and was suave. Mrs. Frobisher, alone in her bed while Matthew snored nearby in his, would imagine the actor whispering to her, his lips on her neck, herself at last responding to physical passion, something that had eluded her in her life thus far . . .

ANNIVERSARY

by MARGARET YORKE

It was a special day.

Mrs. Frobisher had made careful preparations. A bottle of champagne was on ice and she had bought smoked salmon, asparagus, and a plump partridge.

In the living room of her comfortable flat all was arranged. The table was laid with the best silver and cut glass. There were spring flowers in a small vase.

She would celebrate alone, for next to the money her tranquil solitude was, after so long, a prize. For three years she had steadfastly carried out her daily duties—fetching and carrying, wheeling Matthew out in his chair, placing his tweed hat tenderly on his pale bald head, wrapping his soft wool scarf round his throat (though she longed to pull it tight against his windpipe), tucking a mohair rug round his knees and his bony old ankles. Because of her his last

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years had been spent in great comfort—and, indeed, he owed them to her nursing skill.

They met when the agency sent her as his special nurse to the nursing home where Matthew was recovering from a stroke. She was accustomed to caring for the elderly, and she had found him an easy patient. He was light to lift and determined to regain his powers of speech and movement. Aiding his rehabilitation had been a challenge to her skills. After months in the nursing home, he was well enough to leave but required full-time home care, and he suggested to her that she should become his permanent attendant.

This might be her only chance: she had resolved not to let it pass. She was a plain, sturdy woman with a sallow complexion and glasses. Her legs were stout and her ankles thick—though her feet were small, and often, for this reason, ached as they carried her heavy body about her duties. Mr. Frobisher was a widower, and wealthy. His visitors at the nursing home had been his former business associates—he had retired from active work before his illness but was still on the board of several companies. He had no children.

Once home in the flat overlooking the esplanade he became demanding, and she worked hard complying with his wishes. She kept him physically spruce and arranged bridge evenings for him with former cronies, for he had recovered enough to enjoy a few rubbers once or twice a week. She would slip out, then, for a couple of hours at the cinema, returning in time to serve drinks and sandwiches to the men. Otherwise, apart from shopping and trips to the library, she went out only with Matthew, pushing him in his chair along the esplanade when the weather allowed.

She had expected it to be for just a few months—a year at the most—for Mr. Frobisher was old. The excitement of marriage, she had thought, when it came (as she knew it would) would hasten his end.

"You must be cared for, my dear," he told her, patting her hand. "You care for me so well."

When they were married he no longer paid her a salary. He was mean with money. She had discovered this in the nursing home and had known he would think of marriage because it would cost him less, though why he guarded his funds so carefully when he had no one to leave his fortune to was hard to explain. It was characteristic of the elderly rich, she had noticed before. Now she had to account for every penny she spent when shopping, and Matthew saw no

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reason to keep the woman who had come twice a week to do the cleaning.

As the months went by, Mrs. Frobisher was instructed to practice still more thrift by frugal catering. He ordered her to serve mince, rice pudding, and custard instead of salmon, crème caramel, and fruit out of season. She began to adjust her housekeeping accounts to extract enough money for splurges in cafes when she was shopping. Then she would drink coffee or chocolate topped with rich cream and eat cakes and pastries before hurrying home to Matthew, who would be reading the *Financial Times*.

The doctor, who called regularly, praised her care of her elderly husband. He'd got rather difficult, Mrs. Frobisher once confessed, but she knew it was simply his health that made him pernickety about details.

"A trust fund, my dear," Mr. Forbisher had suddenly said one day. "You are not used to handling money. You'll be at the mercy of fortune hunters when I'm gone. I must protect you."

Mrs. Frobisher was dismayed. She wanted her fortune, when she received it, to be her own, to handle as she desired. She had earned it, after all. She would travel. She planned to go on a cruise round the world, perhaps meet romance on a boat deck under the moon. She secretly read brochures, picked up on her shopping trips, and daydreamed over them when Matthew slept. She was still only forty-six years old and she had never known love. A young man resembling a god, she romanced, might woo her in Greece. An Italian with deep brown eyes, perhaps, would serenade her in Venice.

While her husband slumbered, Mrs. Frobisher escaped to a world of dreams. She read magazines, and romantic novels she borrowed from the library without Mr. Frobisher's knowledge. And she watched television, too, until late at night. She had formed an attachment in her mind to a handsome middle-aged actor who featured in many plays. He often played rather sinister roles and was suave. Mrs. Frobisher, alone in her bed while Matthew snored nearby in his, would imagine the actor whispering to her, his lips on her neck, herself at last responding to physical passion, something that had eluded her in her life thus far.

Mr. Frobisher, after their marriage, had requested intimate contact. He was capable only of touch, and that, he indicated, was his right now that they were husband and wife.

"It's not good for you, dear. You'll send up your blood pressure," Mrs. Frobisher had said, avoiding compliance, promising it as a treat

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for one day in the future when he was better. But his hands, increasingly, reached for her as she dealt with his needs; he would watch her with narrowed eyes as she moved about their bedroom.

Mrs. Frobisher had grown to hate her husband before he threatened to curtail her future liberty by means of a trust and acted in time to prevent him.

It had been carefully planned.

At first she had thought of demanding money for personal spending, making him angry, and leaving his physical wants untended so that bedsores and other problems developed, but pride in her profession, finally, would not permit the use of these means to make his blood pressure rise and bring on another stroke—which he might have at any time. Though again, since his heart was strong, he might survive.

In the end, she had been more subtle. She had done it with frozen chicken, thawing it imperfectly and ceasing its cooking too soon, leaving it in the warm kitchen where it could begin to go off even if there were no risk of salmonella. It didn't work the first time, but the second attempt, when she'd made a chicken risotto and added lamb from the weekend joint which she had kept exposed until it started to smell rather nasty, did the trick.

She ate a little herself, so she could tell the doctor, truthfully, that she too had felt ill, but she disposed of all that was left down the lavatory, flushing it thoroughly.

He had lingered for twenty-four hours after the dreadful vomiting, his breathing harsh in the quiet room. She would not have him taken to the hospital. "I am a nurse," she said with pride.

For some hours she had feared he would recover again. She was tempted to lay a pillow over his face or pinch his nostrils, but suppose betraying signs resulted? She could wipe away any froth that might be exuded, but she couldn't disperse petechial hemorrhages if they occurred, and the doctor might observe them. He would look at his patient's eyes.

But such action was not needed.

Just before he died, Matthew opened his eyes and glared at her, seeing her clearly.

He knew. She and the doctor had discussed the possible cause of his food-poisoning while Matthew lay there, and perhaps he had understood their conversation. He had known how careful she was in the kitchen, how unlikely the chance of contaminated food being served under her charge.

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Well, he could do nothing now: it was too late. She stared back at him until it was over.

She had affected grief for a year, only slowly emerging in becoming, elegant clothes—in muted hues as first the executors advanced her funds and finally the estate, which was in perfect order, was settled. And tomorrow she was leaving on a world cruise. Her bags were packed and labeled. The porter in the block of flats knew of her plans. She had no intimate friends, but she told her few acquaintances that she was going away.

During her year of widowhood, Mrs. Frobisher had put on weight, for she had made amends for the years of rice pudding and mince—but she could carry it off, she thought, regarding herself in the mirror. She had had her hair rinsed a rich honey blonde and had bought a mink coat. Her eyeglasses had been exchanged for contact lenses. She felt sure she would find romance on her voyage, though perhaps not of a durable kind. When she returned, she would open an expensive eventide home where rich elderly people could end their days in her experienced care and be off the hands of their families.

That evening, after her celebratory meal, a further treat awaited Mrs. Frobisher—the perfect way to round off the day. The final installment of a television-drama series in which her actor hero played a leading role. She had arranged her cruise for after the end of the series, not willing to miss any appearance he might make. And now, in this last episode, the chain of spellbinding events would be tied off.

Mrs. Frobisher ate her smoked salmon with wafer-thin brown bread and butter. She had learned to cut it like that for her patients. She ate her succulent partridge, and to follow she had two chocolate eclairs bought at the new patisserie in town.

She piled the crockery into the dishwasher. She would turn it on in the morning after breakfast, before the taxi arrived to take her to the airport from which she was due to fly to join her cruise. She made coffee and poured out the last of the champagne to drink while she watched her play.

In the warm luxurious room, Mrs. Frobisher sat in her deep armchair and gazed at the screen while her hero, captured by terrorists planning to kill him, sought to evade what seemed an inevitable fate. The camera cut to his wife (middle-aged and careworn) and his mistress (young and curvaceous). The background was Spanish, the

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countryside burnt brown, baking in shimmering heat. Shots of a bullfight were briefly, irrelevantly, shown.

Mrs. Frobisher's hero, bound and gagged, watched water entering his prison cell in the dungeon of an old castle. It lapped about his feet. The terrorists, on the ramparts, watched for the helicopter that would take them to safety.

The telephone rang in Mrs. Frobisher's hall.

The sound startled her. She received few calls apart from an occasional message from the porter.

Could it be the shipping line? They had her number in case, as the booking clerk had explained, there were last-minute changes of plan, alterations to flights due to weather or other conditions.

She had better answer. She'd be quick, missing only moments of the play's approaching denouement.

She brusquely gave her own number, and added, "Mrs. Frobisher speaking."

"Mavis—at last! I've had such a trouble to find you," a female voice said. "It's Beatrice. I've only just heard you'd got married. I'm so sorry to hear you've lost your husband."

"Beatrice!" Mrs. Frobisher echoed.

"Yes. I traced you through the nursing agency," the voice of her younger sister declared.

Mrs. Frobisher was too shocked to answer. From the living room came the sound of gunfire and the clattering noise of helicopter blades. Mrs. Frobisher replaced the telephone receiver, ignoring the voice that continued to speak, and returned to the living room. She poured herself out a small brandy and was sipping it when the telephone started to ring again.

Mrs. Frobisher sat watching the screen, letting it ring. The blood pounded in her temples. She had not heard from Beatrice for years. Her sister had married young and had four children—she lived in Wales with her farmer husband. What had happened to make Beatrice seek her out?

She wanted money, Mrs. Frobisher thought. She must have discovered that Matthew had been a rich man.

Mrs. Frobisher gazed at the screen, pouring a second brandy. While she was out of the room, her hero had somehow freed himself from his bonds and was now driving a car across a desert while shots were fired at him from a helicopter overhead.

The telephone went on ringing.

Mrs. Frobisher rose, went into the hall, and took the receiver off

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the hook. Her hero, now wounded, was staggering on foot across a small river when she returned to her seat. On the far bank, his mistress was waiting, holding a chestnut horse by the bridle. The camera cut to the helicopter from which guns protruded.

Beatrice had always been a nuisance. She'd been cleverer than Mavis—and prettier, too, with boys hanging about her since she was fourteen. She'd got herself pregnant and had to get married, but hadn't seemed to mind the loss of her chances for betterment. Beatrice, who had not wanted one, had been assured of a university place, while Mavis, who sought advancement, had struggled to pass her nursing exams. She'd crossed swords more than once with ward sisters. Private nursing had been a haven, for she'd soon discovered which patients would pay with gifts for extra attention and which would accept good care as merely their right, so that it was not worth taking trouble for them.

Beatrice, getting in touch with her like this, must want something. It could only be money, for what else had Mavis that Beatrice might envy?

The hero, on her screen, struggled out of the river toward the outstretched hand of his mistress. Guns in the helicopter fired, and at that moment the screen flickered and went black.

It was not a power failure. The soft light from the table lamp beside Mrs. Frobisher's chair burnt on. She rose and pressed various buttons on the set. She hit it and swore, but it remained dark.

The play had ten more minutes to run. Her hero was far from safe. She felt sure that in the end he would escape, but would his mistress survive, too, and how? Were the terrorists caught? The interruption, at such a tense time in the story, enraged Mrs. Frobisher. It was Beatrice's fault—if she hadn't telephoned, the set would not have gone wrong. All their lives, Beatrice had frustrated her sister and taken what was Mavis's due—her looks, her ability to do well at school, the attention, before he died, of their father. And now she had spoiled the perfection of Mrs. Frobisher's special evening.

Mavis stood in front of the television set shaking her fists. Her face went red. The pounding continued inside her head.

As the picture, after a short break due to a transmitter fault, returned to her set, Mrs. Frobisher was unable to see it, for she lay unconscious on the floor.

She lay there all night.

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In the morning, the taxi that was to take her to the airport arrived. When the hall porter telephoned to tell her and there was no reply, he came up himself to knock at her door. In the end, he opened it with his master key.

Mrs. Frobisher's blood pressure, never tested, had, unknown to her, long been high. She had eaten and drunk too well in her year as a widow, and rage and frustration had caused it to soar, bringing on a stroke.

Her eyes opened as she was lifted to a stretcher. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound emerged. She tried to sit up, but she could not move.

Two days later, Beatrice came to the hospital where Mrs. Frobisher, unable to ask for private attention, lay in a public ward. Though it was years since they had met, Mrs. Frobisher recognized her at once, despite greying hair and a red weatherbeaten complexion. There was that something about her—an aura. Mrs. Frobisher knew the word as she stared at the hated face. It was joy. Beatrice was a happy woman.

"Poor Mavis. How terribly sad," Beatrice said, taking Mrs. Frobisher's unresponsive hand which lay neatly on top of the sheet, convenient for the nurse who would take her pulse. "No wonder you couldn't answer the telephone after we were cut off. If only I'd realized, you'd have been found much sooner. Fancy the television still on in the morning, making a terrible noise. But don't worry. I'll see that you're taken care of. I was trying to find you to tell you that Hugh—my eldest son—that his wife has had twins. You're a great-aunt, Mavis. Isn't that nice?" She squeezed Mavis's hand. "I'm sure you can understand what I'm saying," her voice went on. "We've been out of touch too long. Families should stick together. You were hard to trace. You've moved about a lot since you did your training."

Mavis's eyes looked up at the ceiling. She heard and understood every word, but she could not reply.

"Still, you're not short of money, are you? The doctor thinks you have a good chance of getting much better, but you'll always need looking after. I'll take you home with me when you can travel." Again Beatrice patted the motionless hand. "I'm your next-of-kin, after all."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

GERALD TOMLINSON

Troy Cantrell stared hard at Charley, as if he thought the tired comic were hurling personal insults at him. "Fortune cookies," he muttered bitterly. "No, thanks. If I never see another fortune cookie, it'll be too soon." Finishing his drink, he turned to Ed. "Mr. Morrow," he said, "never believe a fortune cookie . . . "

A HOSTAGE TO FORTUNE

by GERALD TOMLINSON

"But lots of guys have made big bucks on cases like this." Troy—I'd already started calling the redheaded kid Troy—took a healthy swig of the perfumy stuff that Joe's Limelite calls vodka.

"No, Troy," I said in my calm, lawyerly way. "It's a straight-out case of assumption of the risk. You go to a baseball game, you take your chances. The batters can line foul balls off your head all night."

"But I was almost killed, Mr. Morrow. I never had a chance. I was out cold in the grandstand for three minutes or more. Bump the size of a golfball. I lost eight days' work at Burger Boy. Headaches for weeks." The youngster set his glass firmly on the bar. "I was hurt bad. I should collect."

"Sorry, Troy. It doesn't matter. Any lawyer'll tell you the same thing. You assumed the risk of being hit when you bought the ticket. There are precedents for this kind of case from here to Yokohama."

Troy Cantrell slouched down like a thwarted turkey buzzard. "I can't believe it. That little hotshot outfielder, Juan Iturbi, he's got a six-million-dollar contract. You know that? He could pay. He put me out cold on the concrete. I mean, there I was, buying a beer and passing two bills down the aisle, next thing I know I'm blindsided.

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Before I open my eyes, I hear a little girl whisper, 'He's dead, ain't he?' "

I felt sorry for the kid. He was truly as dumb as they come. Talking with the other beef-slingers at Burger Boy, he'd been hearing about fat jury awards in personal-injury cases and he figured he had it made when that little Dominican switch hitter cracked a line shot off his skull. He'd come to my cramped office above the hardware store on Route 16, convinced he was going to make both of us rich. "Contingency fee, right? Half for you, half for me?"

I hated to pop his balloon. After all, I could use a generous jury award as much as he could. If I was ever going to get my practice going, I needed something more than the nickel-and-dime cases I'd been getting. Major clients, it seemed, tend to shy away from a new lawyer, even a grey-haired one, with no track record and a two-by-four office over a hardware store.

Still, Troy was more disappointed than I was, so when I told him Juan Iturbi could keep his six million unchallenged, I said, "Come on, pal, I'll buy you a drink to cheer you up."

It was five o'clock, and I told him he was my last client of the day. He was. He was also my first client of the day. Let's face it, there are too many lawyers in New Jersey. My ten-month-old law degree, which I earned after retiring from high-school teaching, was netting me about as much as Troy Cantrell could make tossing french fries at Burger Boy, but I didn't say that, either.

Ordinarily, I go from my office to the Town Tavern in Dover and mingle, to little avail, with a mob of local business types. But today it seemed as if the nightclub atmosphere of Joe's Limelite on Harbor Boulevard, with its go-go dancers, might put Troy and me in a better mood.

It turned out that the go-go girls had gone-gone, replaced by Charley Ringoes, a stand-up comic—"two yards of personality," it said on the sign out front. Charley's wit hardly measured up to his height or his billing. His material was dismal, his timing worse. When we tipped our second glass, Charley was mired in old fortune-cookie jokes.

"Hey, folks, did you hear the one about the fortune cookie that said, 'Help! I'm a prisoner in a Chinese bakery'?"

Yeah, Charley, we heard it. Back in first grade, I think. Or maybe kindergarten.

"And how about this one? I opened a fortune cookie the other night and it said, 'Ignore previous fortunes.' "

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Down the bar, a swivel-hipped woman in a red print dress chuckled and tossed off what looked like a pink lady. No one else among the twenty or so customers made the least sound. I shook my head in mock disgust at the gnarled bartender, who shrugged noncommittally.

To my surprise, Troy was actually concentrating on the yakking of this two yards of humor. I don't mean he laughed. He didn't. He stared hard at Charley, as if he thought the tired comic were hurling personal insults at him.

"Fortune cookies," he muttered bitterly. "No, thanks. If I never see another fortune cookie, it'll be too soon." Finishing his drink, he turned to me. "Mr. Morrow," he said, "never believe a fortune cookie."

"You got something against fortune cookies?" I asked, concluding that he was even dumber than they come.

Troy caught the practiced eye of the bartender and pointed toward our glasses. He then aimed his scowl in my direction. "I hate fortune cookies as much as I hate Juan Iturbi and the Houston Astros."

I felt like a vaudeville straight man. "You must've got stuck with a pretty bad fortune."

"Not exactly," he said. "At the time I thought it was a pretty good fortune. But it cost me plenty."

"What did it say?"

"It said, 'Go for the gold. Make that overdue investment today.' "

I set my Scotch on the bar. "You couldn't have had a very big investment to make," I observed in a neutral tone.

"The hell you say! I had close to a quarter of a million dollars back then. Less than a year ago. Hey, man, that old cash flies like the ponies when you're on top."

Now, here was a turn of events. Troy didn't look the sort who had ever had more than a day's pay on hand at any given moment. "A rich aunt of yours die?"

"No. A rich slot machine in Atlantic City went bananas. A whole string of bananas. One of the big jackpots. I made the Jersey newspapers. My picture was in the *Star-Bulletin.*"

"And you ran right out on Atlantic Avenue and bought gold?"

"You make it sound crazy, Mr. Morrow. But I wanted a good investment. Things had been going bad with me and my partner, and I wanted to put some money away. The price of gold had been shooting up for weeks. Everybody was talking gold, gold, gold. Like the cookie said, it was an overdue investment."

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I remembered the steep rise and fall at the time. "So you bought gold—and then the price dropped."

"Thud! Right through the freaking floor. I was down a hundred grand before I could unload."

"Let me get this straight. The fortune cookie told you to go for the gold. You believed what it said, and you went right out and bought gold?"

"Absolutely."

"But it sounds more like Olympic advice than Confucian advice, doesn't it?"

"Eh?"

"Forget it. You actually thought the fortune cookie was advising you to buy gold?"

Troy looked puzzled. "Advising me to buy gold? It was *telling* me to buy gold! Even my partner thought so. He can read. I can read. Here, look at it." He produced a small piece of rumpled paper from a wallet in his jacket pocket. Sure enough, the message read: "Go for the gold. Make that overdue investment today." Whoever wrote it had probably been watching a Chinese gymnast at the Summer Olympics on TV.

Case law flitted through my mind, but no fortune-cookie cases came winging by. "Where did you get the fortune cookie? A take-out place?"

"No. At a classy Chinese restaurant in Atlantic City, just after I won the money. The Pagoda, I think it's called. On New York Avenue."

"Troy, you're a pretty gullible fellow."

"Thank you."

"No, what I mean is, you must believe everything you read or hear or see. Why, I'll bet you think pro wrestling is on the up and up."

"You bet! Hey, it's a terrific sport! I think Hulk Hogan is a great champion. And do I ever hate that Muldoon, the Carrickmacross Giant. He cheats all the time. Anybody can see it. I think they should disqualify him for good."

Thank you, Mr. Cantrell, I thought smugly. You'll do.

Cases began to define themselves in my mind. A tavern owner in New Jersey would be responsible for selling Troy one too many drinks. A tobacco company might be liable for selling him cancer-causing cigarettes. A school superintendent might be sued for giving him a lousy education. How about a restaurant owner for offering

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him bad financial advice? Too far-fetched? Maybe. But the facts, as Troy told them, were intriguing. And Troy was a born victim.

I asked him, "What happened to the rest of the money you won?"

"Baccarat."

Baccarat. Okay, forget that last remark, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, consider only that poor Troy Cantrell, hard-working burger-and-fries man, had dropped a hundred big ones because a fortune cookie told him to buy gold pronto, before it was too late. No disclaimers in that cookie. Just flat-out financial advice that ruined the lovable redhead and brought him to his present low estate.

I said, "Troy, a toast. To my new client in his struggle against the outrageous lies of fortune cookies." We clinked glasses.

"Juan Iturbi is in the clear," I said. "Forget him. But The Pagoda restaurant may not be. We'll see." I handed him my card.

Twenty minutes later, we left Joe's Limelite, he for Burger Boy, I for my law books.

The case was problematical, I could see that right away. But it had two virtues that were hard to overlook. One was that it would attract a lot of attention. It was custom-made for the media—good copy for them, free advertising for me. The other was that if I got lucky and drew the right jury, I just might walk away with the marbles.

Now, the first thing they teach you in law school is to sue everybody in sight—everybody who could possibly be considered culpable, not just the last link in a causal chain. In the Pagoda case, this clearly meant the supplier and the baker of the cookies. Their identities were easy enough to find. In addition to The Pagoda in Atlantic City, I named the Eng Sun Provision Company of Newark and the Chin Bow Bakery of Staten Island.

Having started the wontons simmering, I called a long-time friend, a columnist for the *Star-Bulletin*. "Sal," I said. "Do you want a scoop? A real offbeat story? It's about how I'm suing a Chinese restaurant for giving a client a bum investment tip via a fortune cookie. No, wait, Sal. I'm serious. The client is a gawky kid whose carrot-red head—don't quote me on this—is a very large bubble. He needs the protection of the law more than most, because on his own he'd probably lose his shoes and socks at high noon to a wino. Yeah, Sal, he's stupid. Naive. Immature. But wait. Your four-year-old granddaugh-

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ter believes in Santa Claus, doesn't she? My client believes in fortune cookies."

Sal finally bought it. The Associated Press picked it up. And a photo of Troy Cantrell, holding a fortune cookie aloft, grinned out from newspapers coast to coast.

At this point, let me make an observation. I've always believed that any stand you take, however popular, even one with almost universal support, will produce instant, unforeseeable opponents. A politician in Lone Prairie, Iowa, can make a snide remark about the Republic of the Maldives and before the sun sets, some obscure Maldive cheerleader will surface and start throwing verbal coconuts at him.

And so it was with Cantrell v. Pagoda Restaurant.

I was sitting in my office, surrounded by out-of-town newspapers, basking in the glory that comes with publicity, however bad, when two neatly dressed men appeared in the outer doorway and introduced themselves softly to my secretary. One was Danny, the other was Sam. No surnames. I wasn't sure which was which. They were Chinese, and by the look of them they had come a long way from pulling rickshaws. The price of their tailored three-piece suits would have paid the annual rent on my office overlooking scenic Route 16.

"Mr. Morrow," the taller of the two said with a compressed smile, "in the words of Joan Rivers, can we talk?"

I waved them to a couple of chairs in my little private preserve and closed the door.

"Mr. Morrow," the shorter of the two picked up the dialogue, "I'm sure you realize that the Chinese are by nature peaceable."

"Of course."

"Still," he went on, "it's hard to sit by and watch an honest business destroyed by a frivolous lawsuit."

"My client lost more than a hundred thousand—"

"Mr. Morrow," the taller one broke in, "we didn't come here to debate. We came here to tell you to drop the case. To withdraw the suit. Never mind who we are or who we represent. Our message is simple. Quit. You have only two choices—abandon your action against The Pagoda or be prepared to bury a dead client."

That was it. Presented factually, like the news of the day. Bury a dead client, the man said, as if burying clients were part of my office routine. The taller one—Danny, I thought, but I wasn't certain—looked toward his partner. As cool as two bamboo shoots, they

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stood up and stalked out the door, leaving my questions hanging unspoken in the stale air.

I had two choices: forget the first big break of my belated career, or leave Troy Cantrell dangling like ripe fruit in front of a couple of grim-reaper Chinese.

A little reflection convinced me that there was no need to panic. I decided to call their bluff, to go ahead with the lawsuit. I thought it was a safe gamble. The case was too insignificant on the one hand, yet—paradoxically—too much in the public eye on the other. Violence was neither likely nor plausible. The Pagoda would probably prevail in court. Why should its backers upset the cookie cart?

My question was rhetorical, but their answer came loud and clear.

A few weeks from the day of the Route 16 encounter, Troy was to meet me at the Morristown office of Adams & Fein, attorneys for the defense, who were to take his deposition. I arrived early and waited for him near the entrance to the Graham Building. From where I stood, I could see north to the end of Elm Street where it intersects with Monroe. There were quite a few cars on the narrow one-way street, but only a handful of pedestrians. One of them was Troy, his red hair slicked back with beargrease for the big event. He was decked out in his Sunday best, an ill-fitting grey suit, a white shirt with a frayed collar, and a plain lavender tie. He spotted me and waved.

As I was about to wave back, I noticed a small maroon sedan—a BMW, I think—slow down beside him. With a sickening shock, I saw that it had opaque windows and no license plate. Next I saw a black barrel thrust suddenly from the lowered back window next to the sidewalk. I shouted something, but it was overwhelmed by the traffic noise, the crack of the pistol, and the scream of a woman with a pekingese.

The woman flattened herself against the wall of the building, shaken but unhurt. The pekingese yipped.

The hard-luck redhead sagged and fell.

The maroon sedan continued north on Elm Street and slanted west on Monroe. I had watched the whole thing happen, yet I saw little that would be helpful to the police—not even a glimpse of the occupants of the car.

For a few seconds, I stared north, transfixed. An air of unreality pervaded the scene. It reminded me of something out of a 1930s movie. But it was real enough. Troy Cantrell was dead. And with

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him, the case was dead. In one blinding instant, the maroon sedan had persuaded me that the fortune-cookie business was best left undisturbed.

There were lots of questions—a rushing host of questions—but no answers. The police publicly expressed confidence that the killer or killers would be found, but privately expressed doubts. Gang-style killings seldom feature prompt arrests. I expected the police to move on to other pressing matters without much delay or remorse.

Curiously, the one person who wanted to pursue the case was my old pal Sal of the *Star-Bulletin*. He phoned me three days after the funeral and said, "Ed, how the hell do you find these clients of yours? This guy Troy Cantrell, recently terminated, for instance. You told me he was a low-grade moron, a jerk. You said he was a fast-food jockey who needed a buck."

"That's right."

"That's not right, Ed. That's all wrong. For starters, Troy Cantrell wasn't even Troy Cantrell. He was Tony Cline from Bayonne, a con artist and all-purpose thief, a smart and seasoned bad guy. Four arrests, no convictions. Tony used at least six aliases, and he needed all six. Ed, my boy, this Tony C. was very unpopular among the casino gambling fraternity. He told you he won a bundle at the slots in Atlantic City. Well, he did. He was always hitting the slots under one name or another. Sometimes in Vegas, sometimes in the Caribbean, sometimes in Jersey. But it wasn't dumb luck. He and D. N. Lee, a Chinese hood from Staten Island, had a method for jimmying the machines. The casinos were on the trail of these two with what you might call miffed zeal. They and the police are still after Lee. Imagine their surprise when Tony Cline, a.k.a. Troy Cantrell, turned up in the newspapers as the plaintiff in a fortune-cookie case and then got himself loudly knocked off."

All this was a lot to absorb. "Okay," I said. "Okay. I didn't know much about Troy—Tony Cline—it's true. So tell me, why was he working at Burger Boy?"

"He wasn't. Did you check out his story? The police did. They checked every Burger Boy from Port Jervis to Cape May. Tony was a con man, Ed. You understand that? He conned you, for instance. He may have been broke—he was a compulsive gambler—but at the time of his death he was living in a very upscale highrise in Fort Lee. When he came to you with his negligence case, he was probably looking for rent money. You must have convinced him he could make

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a megabuck killing, not to mention legal history, with the fortune-cookie suit. He should have told you to go fly a Chinese kite."

"But why murder?"

"I don't know. My guess is that those two visitors of yours came from the mob, not from a cookie factory. Of course, it's possible that The Pagoda is mob-owned. That's something I haven't looked into."

I still didn't see. It smelled as fishy to me as last week's rock cod. Troy Cantrell, or whoever he was, had been gunned down on a city street in broad daylight. That is a pretty extreme sanction to apply to a minor problem. The lawsuit, despite its publicity, was widely regarded as a forlorn cause. The casino ripoffs, although costly and no doubt embarrassing, would seem to call for an arrest, not a rubout. Sal was entitled to his theories, but the real question remained—who hated the scheming redhead enough to kill him? And why?

Then it hit me. Sal was right on one count, I figured. The ownership of The Pagoda was a key element in the case. It had to be. —I made inquiries. Bingo!

I revved up my temperamental Chevy and headed south on 287 to the Garden State Parkway, then south past Barnegat to the Atlantic City exit. I remembered the town before it had become Las Vegas East, an elegant resort fallen to seed and shabby gentility, but fascinating all the same because of its ghosts. In those pre-casino days, the glory of its once-fashionable hotels could still be imagined. No more. The magic had ended with demolition. Now the hotels were new, the money was new, and most of the restaurants were new, including The Pagoda on New York Avenue.

The Pagoda had the restrained grey-and-white decor that a number of Chinese restaurants have chosen in recent years to highlight their break with tradition, or their rejection of kitsch, however you view it. I don't mind modern decor, but I prefer the riotous old red and gold.

A tall, carefully groomed headwaiter met me at the door. "One?" he asked.

"One question," I countered. "Is Danny Lee here?"

He looked appropriately inscrutable.

"I'm Ed Morrow from Morris County," I said, "the lawyer who represented Tony Cline in the fortune-cookie suit. The late Tony Cline, alias Troy Cantrell."

"The suit has been dropped, I believe," the waiter replied.

"But Tony's killer is still on the loose. I'd like to find him. Are you Yutang Lee, the owner of this restaurant?"

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"I am."

"Then I repeat, is your son, Danny Lee, here?"

The dining area was deserted at this hour, 3:30 in the afternoon, and Mr. Lee led me to a nearby table. He sat down facing me, expressionless. A young Chinese waiter appeared almost immediately. "Yes?"

Mr. Lee waved him away. "The person you refer to as Danny is not here, Mr. Morrow. His actual name is Ju-chou, but that is neither here nor there. In a family sense, Danny has never been here. His bent is not for a mundane business such as this. He is what I think you would call an adventurer."

"I think I'd call him a lot worse than that."

"Perhaps. But Danny, as you surely know by now, did have enough family pride to object when Mr. Tony Cline proposed to involve our small establishment in his foolish lawsuit. Mr. Cline has eaten here countless times. He has been an honored guest. You see how he intended to repay our hospitality. Yes, my son did call on you, Mr. Morrow, accompanied, I believe, by a disreputable young friend of his, Sam Yop from Staten Island. I understand they threatened to kill your client in the event he persisted in his lawsuit. Not surprisingly, you regarded it as a bluff. So did I. Your client, incredibly, was suing under an alias. Your suit was a nuisance, but it was also nonsense. My attorney assured me that you had no case whatsoever."

"Danny must have thought otherwise."

"Danny never thought anything. Danny acted. He was furious at Mr. Cline, his ungrateful friend and partner, and he rushed in, impulsive as always. He was further irritated, I believe, when you failed to take him at his word. His honor apparently would not permit him to back away from his threat."

"So he shot my client."

"Mr. Morrow, I cannot say for certain that he shot your client. My son is emotionally troubled. He is compulsive, not only as a gambler but in many other ways. He is also a criminal. I do not excuse him for that. When he was thirteen years old he threatened to kill me with a cleaver during a trivial argument. I am convinced he intended to do so. He won that battle. My courage was not equal to his resolve."

I nodded. "I think I'd better go to the police."

Mr. Lee studied my face with the intensity of a learned and concerned judge. "I think," he said at last, "you should avoid doing that. Danny is in hiding because you and Mr. Cline brought a civil suit against his father's restaurant. If he were to learn that you wish to

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bring a criminal suit against him personally, who can say what his course of action would be? My son is not a rational man."

I thought about that all the way home. Mr. Lee was probably right. Any good citizen who dared to put the finger on Danny Lee would have to spend his days and nights looking over his shoulder. I wasn't prepared to do that.

Next day I put through a call to Sal. "Hey, pal," I said cheerily, "forget the mob. It's the cookie connection, after all, and do I have a scoop for you. But listen, Sal. Cover your tracks on this one. You're on superdangerous ground. The guy who killed Tony Cline is one Danny Lee—actually Ju-chou Lee—of Atlantic City, a small-time crook. Back in happier days, he was Tony Cline's partner in the jimmying of casino slot machines. Danny is also the son of Yutang Lee, the man who owns The Pagoda near the Boardwalk. You remember Cantrell versus Pagoda Restaurant?"

Sal whistled and went to work. His story hit the newsstands two days later. He didn't cover his tracks at all, though, and I started to sweat for his safety, accusing myself of timidity and callousness, but Sal's luck—and mine—held. The police quickly caught up with Danny Lee hiding out with his friend and coconspirator, Sam Yop, in a Staten Island condo. Both men were in custody with comfortingly high bail before Danny could make, let alone carry out, any plans for zeroing in on the *Star-Bulletin*'s ace columnist and sending him, as I'm sure he must have wished, to that great pagoda in the sky.

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

"That was overkill!" Fogle blurted. "That was unnecessary! Creaming the poor guy, that's Fascist. Once a pig— You're fired, Straitt."

Les countered amiably. "One, I don't work for you. Two, me and Mrs. Fogle have an agreement—I'm hired for ten days and for those ten days nobody fires me, not even her . . ."

ANIMALS WITH MONEY

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Straitt had never set out to be walking will power for people too dumb or scrambled to stay out of trouble, but it paid well. That was okay—he didn't have to like it.

So the interview with Ellie Fogle, out there on the patio, was stiffly awkward. The bikini didn't help, nor did the fact that she was young enough to be his daughter. "You don't look tough," Mrs. Fogle ventured as if reassuring herself.

"Looks don't get the job done." Trying to soften the putdown, he added, "Your husband needs tough, Mrs. Fogle, I'll scrape some up."

She gestured unhappily. "It was meant as a compliment. I was afraid you'd turn out to be, like, very physical, shoulders out to here and maybe scars. Oh, dear, you're so *sure* about things—judgmental, I can tell."

Les Straitt nearly laughed in her pretty face. The older he got, the less sure he was of anything. His brand of certainty had been founded on logic, order, honor. For a while the Marines provided them, giving him a place in a religion known as the military. Then he and the Corps went to Nam, and by the time Straitt mustered out he was a spoiled priest, his faith lost.

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No point in trying to explain all that to Ellie Fogle, who was maybe twenty-four years old. Instead he said, "Don't worry, I'll look after your husband—but with kid gloves. What I do is run interference."

Ellie Fogle sighed with relief, nodding gratefully. There wasn't much character in her features but she looked a decent enough kid. "I make Boz sound terrible," she murmured. "It's just that I'm so worried. Boz is fine until the pressure gets to him."

Straitt said nothing. To him, pressure was losing your officer in a firefight first time in combat. Or drawing against the drop, which he'd done once while a street cop. He wasn't scoffing at other kinds of pressure, he simply didn't understand them.

Now he mused that his client's husband, Boz Fogle, was well on the sunny side of thirty, a modestly gifted and not very original comedian. He had followed his debut in a hit movie with featured roles in a brace of turkeys and had just been signed for his fourth picture, costarring for more money than Les expected to earn over the next decade.

Pressure.

Glancing around the patio, with its Italian-tiled surface and cute brick walls spattered with gaudy rock plants, Les thought this was a nice little place. He wondered if the Fogles had bought it and decided not. A studio rental, most likely. A downstairs window overlooking the patio blinked as somebody walked across the room. "I guess your husband is up and around," Les said, "so I might as well get started."

Boz Fogle, strolling down the pier when he badly wanted to run, walked oddly. He was as gangling and puppyish as a teenager but the face didn't match—eyes prematurely mature and watchful as those of conmen, gunfighters, and professional clowns tend to be. Lank hair brushed his shoulders and he needed a shave.

Locked and shuttered, the diner at the far end of the pier was closed for the season. Exactly which season seemed open to doubt, from its blistered paint and rust streaks. Fogle, glancing back along the decking to find it empty for a hundred yards, grinned happily and hurried around a corner of the building to where he would be invisible from the shore.

Seagulls exploded into the hard blue sky, plumage eerily white by contrast, screaming with what might have been excited laughter.

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But that wasn't what made him halt so abruptly that his training shoes yelped on the weathered boards.

A man was crawling on the decking behind the diner, weeping and cursing indistinctly. A gluey cable of gory saliva tethered his lower jaw to the wood. Just beyond him, Les Straitt skimmed the last small clear-plastic pack into thin air. The gulls, no longer swooping for what they'd mistaken for food, cackled in frustration.

"You were back at the car," Fogle wailed, ignoring the man at their feet. "You were behind me, I left you there."

"Like the old song, I get around," Les observed drily. Fogle had walked off down the pier and Straitt had given him one minute's start before following out of sight, beneath it. You could do that when the tide was out, then climb a ladder to regain the decking at the far end. But he didn't bother to explain. Sometimes it helped to lay things out for Boz—it diverted and interested him—but this was not such a time.

Thrusting balled hands into his jeans, Fogle muttered, "I always hated this pier."

"Tony wouldn't do business anyplace else." Straitt knelt beside the crawling man. "Your money's overside with the other stuff, Tony. Twelve hundred dollars. Getting Boz high can ruin a person's day. Think on that, and pass the word."

They were nearly back at the car when Fogle blurted, "That was overkill, that was unnecessary! Creaming the poor guy, that's Fascist. Once a pig— You're fired, Straitt."

Les countered amiably, "One, I don't work for you. Two, me and Mrs. Fogle have an agreement—I'm hired for ten days and for those days nobody fires me, not even her."

"Ten days. What's so special about that?"

"Get yourself clean—cleaner, anyway—so when this movie starts, you'll know which way is up. And remember your pitch."

"Script," the comedian corrected. A few paces on, he said, "Tony's not a real pusher. Financing his own habit, poor guy, and doing two–three of us a favor."

Les gazed down at him in sardonic wonder. "With better than a thousand bucks on him?" Repressing his anger, he said patiently, "He wanted to cut me back there. I changed his mind."

"Tony?" Fogle scoffed. "Now I know you're a liar. He's a real gentle person."

Sure, Straitt answered back in his head. Real gentle. With a blade that wanted to be a cavalry saber when it grew up. He grimaced

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and shook his head, boot heels hitting the pier harder. But then he grinned at the thought of the fish down in the sea off the end of the pier, getting gifts from the gods of the upper world—dope, money, a switchblade.

Noting Straitt's expression and infuriated by it, Fogle flung himself into the Jaguar's passenger seat. "Drive me home, liar."

Three days, Les reminded himself. That wasn't so long. If you said it fast.

Straitt slept in the guest room of the pretty little house. Tuesday, soon after first light, Ellie Fogle padded in to shake him awake. "Boz is acting strange—get down there, *please,* before he takes off!"

"There" turned out to be the patio where her husband prowled, seemingly on springs, eyes too bright, almost crackling with electricity or something close—chemical static. "Top o' the morning," he gabbled when Straitt appeared. "Busy, busy, busy, got to move and groove, burning daylight here, time's awasting."

Heartsick but poker-faced, Les said, "Sure. Only let's get coffee and something to eat first, huh? Long day coming up, right?"

"For sure, for sure," Fogle crooned.

Somebody had tossed a hit of something into the yard, Les guessed, and Fogle had pounced on it. *Damn.*

"Eat all you want," Fogle invited, gesturing grandly. His tone turned casual. "In fact, pig out while I handle some boring professional stuff in the den. *Then* we'll roll. Ellie, keep the man company, cook up some of those famous hotcakes, why don't you?"

Les, wrapping croissants in a paper towel to shove in his jacket pocket, just looked at the man. Fogle shrugged. "Worth a shot. Come on then." They went through to the garage.

That day ended around thirty-six hours later. Toward the finish, Straitt's face was masked by brindled silver-black stubble and his eyes felt seated in hot tar. Boz Fogle looked worse and exuded a faint stench of exotic garbage.

But then Les had grabbed a two-minute shower in the motel while Fogle pretended to pass out in the other cabin. When Boz managed to climb out the window on the third muzzy attempt, he found Les at the wheel of the Jaguar, cracking the door for him without comment.

It had been an endurance contest, with Boz having a quarter century or more on his opponent and the advantage of fighting on his home turf. They'd covered a lot of L.A., most culture dishes

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breeding human germs. There had been a detour into a record label's tower, and there, in an executive suite roomy enough for a basketball game, a man no stranger to *Fortune* magazine had slipped a packet of coke into Boz Fogle's palm even as he greeted the entertainer. He was taken aback by the bad manners—not embarrassed or worried—when Les confiscated the stuff.

They'd hit a dozen bars, from gay to punk, courted ptomaine poisoning by eating at a topless joint, and checked in at discos as well. Straitt's head throbbed from hours of ill-lit, deafening, strobing, nightmarish mingling. All the same, he had kept Fogle's body and pockets clear of anything but food, a little vodka, and sundry Coors. They were driving by the ocean when he mumbled, "This is stupid," and pulled over onto the shoulder. He was losing contact for split-seconds at a time, chin snapping up, eyelids popping open in panic.

"What I been saying all along," Boz Fogle croaked. "Get lost, narc."

"No. Look, you've got no will power to save your skin, so you hire me. Sure, Ellie talked it up and paid the money, but you had to let her. It's the games, Boz, the jazz. You're keeping the pushers and maybe some Central American peasants in business and it's all to put your own career down the tubes. First the career, then you. You *die*. All this work and nervous energy to snuff yourself, hurt your old lady. Hell, you want that, I'll give you a piece, cock it ready, you do the rest. But this, all this—it is stupid, man."

"Jeez," Fogle responded drearily, "I never heard you talk so much. Lot of dialogue. You a quick study or what? Get off my case."

"You put me on it, you and your wife." Les wiped the heels of his hands around his eye sockets, exhaled shudderingly. "Forget it. Where to now?"

Fogle didn't reply at once. Resentful, he whined, "Stupid? It's one thing knowing you got to change. Making it stick—you don't know what it's like being me."

Les repeated, "Where to?"

"The house. Why not?" Fogle was snoring before Les, with a mighty effort of concentration and memory, worked out that he had to put the car in Drive if they wanted to move again.

It was such a great evening, too. Lemon yellow and dove grey, balmy as paradise, and gentle as a mother's kiss. Straitt would always remember the beauty of that twilight as they rolled down the driveway to the Fogles' place.

It would be tempting to switch off, sit back, and sleep, but he got

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out and walked around the hood and urged Fogle off the seat. Grasping his thin wrist, he pulled Fogle's arm across his shoulders and started walking him to the house.

Like a guttering candle flaring toward the last, his spirit rose. Hardly a day left now.

And that bush by the porch was advancing and bushes didn't advance on their own, making it not a bush but a man. Les halted, Fogle's slack weight dragging him sideways, and cursed flatly. "Come on, Tony, we did that. Get yourself out of here, huh?"

Tony wasn't hearing words but reacting to sounds. He was a giant moth fluttering, his pale unstructured jacket billowing as he ran toward them, screeching with hatred beyond words. The knife looked to be as long as his entire forearm.

A corner of Straitt's tired mind recognized the blade. Six of them in a fancy beechwood block in the kitchen. He prayed that Ellie Fogle had as usual left the house without remembering to lock the kitchen door. Otherwise, Tony had taken the knife over her protests.

For three of Tony's strides, he worried over Ellie's fate, letting Boz Fogle slide to the ground and reaching for the Browning in its shoulder rig. Then Boz hugged him in a nightmare parody of comradeship, hooking a leg behind Straitt's. "Get him, Tony!" he whooped. "Go, Tony!"

Fogle had no idea of being accessory to murder—it was just that Tony was the guy with the dope, which from Boz's semi-stunned point of view gave the entire scene an austere simplicity. Tony was the one to help, no question.

Straitt never really registered the blade enter him, though he witnessed the event. Tony's right hand hurtled toward his middle, there was a hard shoving sensation, and then only four inches of steel was visible between his shirt and the knife handle.

Outrage, revulsion, and alarm triggered an adrenalin surge. He threw himself back so that Fogle's head impacted against the wall of the house and the man's grasp fell away. The pistol cleared the holster and swung up in an arc to smash Tony's jaw.

The pusher's head snapped to one side and the Browning soared up until gravity brought the barrel down. Straitt's elbow locked and the muzzle stopped perhaps three feet from Tony, who was squatting like an ape, cupping his face in bloodied hands.

Les yearned to squeeze off a round.

He didn't.

A car came down the drive. For a moment Les thought it was the

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police, but it was a taxi. He tried to put the Browning away, but it was too heavy and he felt too dizzy. When he looked down, either his eyes were swimming or the embedded knife was jerking slightly as he breathed.

Ellie Fogle ran over from the cab, high heels pecking. "What's going on?" she demanded, helping her husband to his feet. Then she noticed Tony, still squatting, still holding his face. Then she saw the knife growing out of Straitt and she knew what was going on.

"No," she breathed, turning her head away in a travesty of shocked virtue. "Ah, no. Come inside, Boz. We're going inside. This has nothing to do with us."

The taxi driver, intent on getting his money from her, stopped short. Staring at Straitt's midsection and the spreading, brightly wet stain, the driver's eyes and lips went down at the corners and he cried out softly in Spanish.

The house door slammed. Les put all he had, which was little, into addressing the man. "Call it in, get help fast." The driver didn't move. Les was never sure later whether he'd repeated, "Call it in, I'm dying," or whether he'd only thought it.

He didn't die, but then the paramedics had been good and the surgeon better.

The police took a statement. They took several, in fact, a terse whodidit while he was still on a dolly heading for emergency and others when he was out of intensive care.

Straitt told them he'd been at the house in connection with work for Mrs. Fogle—an irrelevant matter and privileged information. He said, with truth, that he and Tony had clashed previously. He pointed out—the thrust of their talk seeming to put him in the wrong—that he had a pistol permit, premises *and* carry.

The law didn't like it too well, which was tough, since Straitt wasn't crazy about the affair, either. They never caught up with Tony. Perhaps—easy to be cynical in a hospital bed—they looked less than fervently.

Fogle's agent came by to say he trusted that Straitt carried Blue Cross and general insurance for such mishaps, since no way was his client liable or responsible.

"Responsible is something I'd never charge him with," Straitt agreed. "Now get out of here."

All that could have been offset by Ellie Fogle's visit while he recuperated. Except that after some leaden conversation and awk-

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ward chitchat, guilt and shame whipped her into a temper tantrum in which she accused him of brutal lack of finesse. It was only thanks to the new film's producer that a scandal had been averted. This helped Les understand why the police had been less than admiring. They'd been reached.

Finally Ellie burst into tears and tossed $5,000 on the bed, begging him not to talk to the sort of magazines found at the supermarket checkout. Les took the money, more as a fine on her than a bonus, before pleading the need for a nap. He'd preferred her feisty and hysterical to whiny and tearful.

That was it with the visits. Dorothy's, some weeks later, didn't count because she lived in the next apartment. Dorothy called herself a freelance recreational consultant and Straitt called her Dorothy. She wandered in his first night back home.

"I heard you been poorly," she said tactfully. "So if you don't wanna party—"

"Can't. Stitches," he explained laconically.

Dorothy went straight to the dresser, knowing which drawer held the decks of cards. "We'll play gin, then. Cards is fine. Cards are *better.*"

Never much good with gratitude, affection, or compassion, Les said gruffly, "You don't look so special yourself, for once." Her cheek was bruised, the look in her eyes when she forgot to smile was worse than bruised, and the touch of the chair on her back provoked a wince.

"Animals out there," Dorothy sighed. "What can I tell you, it paid well." She shuffled the cards. "Hollywood."

They looked at each other.

"Sure," said Straitt, dismissing the animals and their money. "Right. Hollywood."

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In "Mississippi Winter IV," Alice Walker wrote: "My father and mother both used to warn me that 'a whistling woman and a crowing hen would surely come to no good end.' And perhaps I should have listened to them. But even at the time I knew that though my end probably might not be good I must whistle like a woman undaunted until I reached it."

C. S. Kentis is a young woman who lives in the west suburbs of Cleveland. A very young woman of twenty-one, whose promise shines through this first story. She also writes general fiction, fantasy, and humor. We wish her well outside the mystery genre —and hope she will continue to apply herself to the mystery as well . . .

WHISTLING WOMEN AND CROWING HENS

by C. S. KENTIS

A lifetime in monotonous Mulberry Ridge hasn't witnessed any change except that it's even more miserly than I recall from my childhood memories. Maybe it's simply a sign of middle-age blues, but I don't think so. I don't mind being middle-aged. I sometimes think I was born to be forty-five. What festers my soul is the boredom.

My only daughter Lizzie just left for a college in one of those big cities and every week she writes about some gala she's gone to. I swear she's been through two beaux already. Of course, I don't always approve, but it's still something for her to do.

I don't work—which intensifies this incessant boredom. I run the bed-and-breakfast my husband left me, but I can't really work about the place. I'm not one of those who are visibly crippled. The town,

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prim but always speculating, has diagnosed my condition as sheer laziness. I don't bother trying to educate the crocodiles. My condition as it truly is, is weakness. I've never had any energy, and no amount of vitamins, caffeine, exercise, or so-called experts with a diploma have ever been able to change it.

Enough of this dwelling on boring, boring, boring, monotonous Mulberry.

It was the brightest day last fall and I was resting in the rocking chair by the front window. Autumn has always been my favorite time of the year even though it means business will soon die off. The inn's surrounded by trees and deciduous bushes and they glow and the leaves float to the ground, spreading out a brilliant blanket. I was reading by the light through the window, pausing every other page to daydream, when someone's whistling stopped me mid-paragraph. It was a joyous whistle, skipping and frolicking. After listening intently, I realized why it struck me so. No one in Mulberry whistles. Occasionally a good row of disagreement stirs the air, but you never hear a hum let alone a whistle. People go about their lives with no waver from the routine unless Mrs. Pepperson catches whiff of a barnyard story.

Just as I was about to rise and head for the porch, the whistler entered. He was a gallant gentleman if I've ever seen one, with a confident, equestrian stature. He had a face that was shaven and unblemished, a crisp, clean look, a good haircut but not too short, and a sparkle in the eyes that immediately put me at ease. His manner was that of popping in on an old friend. "Good afternoon. You wouldn't happen to have a room, would you?"

"One next to the water closet."

"Sounds perfect. Not that I'm an occupier of the cubicle for selfish lengths of time, mind you. There's certain things a decent chap does not hog."

"It doesn't matter. You're the only guest." I quickly added, "For the moment."

"Then I won't bother informing you that I know how to keep the volume of my person down and that I don't sleep-walk. Nor do I sleep-scream. I do, though, like scrambled eggs and my bacon cremated, if it's not too much trouble. And do you mind if I bring my pet frog to the breakfast table?"

"A frog?"

"A toad, actually. Herman, I call him. I'm Henry and he's Her-

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man." He plucked his pal from his jacket pocket. "And better than most dogs on the paper subject."

"I see. Well, I guess I don't mind."

"I've had dogs, but they don't travel well." He hiked up an ordinary kitchen chair that I leave out for momentary sits. "I've been so rude. What's your name?"

"Martha."

"Martha, hum." He scratched his chin. "Anyone ever call you Marty?"

"No," I snapped.

"Then why don't I call you Marty? Stir up an eyebrow, eh, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly would," I retorted. It would have been difficult to guess his age. He may have been thirty-five, maybe forty, or maybe even plus or minus on either end. I wasn't brazen enough to ask.

"You're not married, are you? I couldn't call you Marty if you were married."

"I'm widowed."

"I'm sorry. I suppose you don't believe that. Everyone says so automatically, so that after the first couple toss it off it stops sounding sincere. Well, perhaps I should just say I understand grief."

I interrupted what was running the risk of building into a speech. "It was five years ago."

"Any children?"

"A daughter. She started her first year of college this fall." I bit my tongue, as the cliché goes. I don't usually speak to strangers like this. I'm always polite, and that includes talking about children, but this stranger seemed to absorb my words out of me.

"What's her name?"

"Lizzie."

"Liz. That's an impressive college name. Did you or your husband choose it?"

"That's an odd-color question, mister."

"Henry. I'm Henry and my toad is Herman." He stroked the beast that was flopped on his knee. "I would conjure that Liz is a name a mother would pick."

"Perhaps Liz is, but Elizabeth was my husband's suggestion."

"You're absolutely correct, absolutely. I should have used the old bean. Of course Liz is short for Elizabeth. Just like Marty is short for Martha."

"Sort of." I slipped the bookmark in where my finger was and

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closed the book. This was going to be a long conversation. Not that I minded. "So what brings you to Mulberry?"

"My feet. But I shouldn't write off my legs and hips and spine and, of course, that wonderful control station, the brain."

"Where are you from? Where are you going?"

"I don't really know where I'm going to go next. Wherever my feet wear out."

"It must be exciting."

"Sometimes it is. I like to think of every day as an adventure, and it is when I don't know where I'll be in an hour, when a bag of money will be hid under the rock I rest my bones on, or where there's a dog dreaming of cropping me off at the knee." He looked around the sunny room. "You've got a dandy box of boxes here. Turn of the century?"

"Eighteen ninety-eight, but in fine shape. My husband loved to restore old buildings even after they were restored. And we could never have too many flowers or bushes. I've had to give up on the flowers, though. I haven't had—" my eyes shifted down to my hands "—the time." I felt foolish. Certainly he'd realize I had more than enough time to build a mountain.

"The hardest part about flowers are the weeds. Now I think most weeds are prettier than conventional to-do, but neighbors are rarely as liberal."

"Neighbors can mess up a perfect life."

"Not to mention one's reputation."

I giggled.

For heaven's sake, it's natural for a normal woman to get a little giddy around a swell-featured fellow, especially one who is interested in what the woman in question has to say. For five years, not once had the gid bit me and it was high time—and, sadly, what I reasoned would be a very short time.

Around Christmas-shopping time the whistler bustled through the front door again and chimed like bells. "Hello, hello, hello!"

I hurried—something my daughter didn't let go unnoticed—down the hall from the kitchen.

"Henry, you're back." My eyes flashed fearfully to his pocket. "Not with Herman, I hope."

"Gosh, no, Marty. I left him with a boy in a warm climate I made darn sure was not one for hurting little fellows." He clapped his snowy mittens together. "This must be Liz."

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Lizzie was looming in the doorway, her stubborn eyes surveying the scene.

"Lizzie, this is Henry. Henry, this is Lizzie." I left her curiosity at that. Had I wanted to explain Henry, I doubt if I could have. I turned back to Henry. "Would you like a cup of hot chocolate?"

"Yes, please, and some cremated bacon if it's no trouble."

"It's still no trouble."

I dare say, but not with surprise, that my daughter didn't take fondly to Henry. Her remark after reviewing the results of Henry's tree-trimming was merely, "Ornate."

He shrugged it off. "I prefer to see it as clinquant."

Lizzie puffed and left the room.

"Don't worry. She's just practicing her college." I sat down in my rocker and stared at the tree. The pink and white glitter bows especially touched me. "You've got a sensitive streak in you."

"Why do you say that?" He plopped down on the rag rug in front of the fireplace.

"Most men wouldn't have bought pink ribbons for a tree."

"But women will be looking at the tree, too. Water closets and Christmas trees are meant to be shared. Your life is too stiff, Marty. Someday I'm going to get you to whistle."

I recited, "Whistling women and crowing hens all come to some bad end."

"Maybe." Henry clicked his tongue as he half heartedly stoked the fire. "Or maybe they whistle because they know the end isn't bad."

I closed my eyes and rocked gently. What a strange man.

"Where's Henry?" I asked Lizzie Christmas Eve morning.

Her brows crept into distortion. "Gone out with Al Tucker."

"What for?"

"They were going to hunt up a stray horse. It broke through Tucker's fence, I guess. Something like that anyways."

"You don't like Henry, do you?"

"I see it shows." She dried a dish and shoved it in the cupboard.

"I can't say much for him, Lizzie. Not that I don't want to. I like Henry. I just don't know *what* to say about him."

"He cheers you up."

"Yes. Yes, that's it."

"And that's good—to a point." Her sober face made my skin itch. "There's something wrong with him, Mom."

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"Like what?"

"I don't know."

"Just because he's a little different, you think there's something wrong with him? I thought college was supposed to make you more liberal."

"You don't love him, do you, Mom?"

"No." I clenched my fists. "I love your father."

I waited for Henry to return, but he didn't. We went about Christmas and New Year's, and Lizzie returned to college without a further peep of Henry.

On an early day in February, I caught Al Tucker in the general store and I asked him how it turned out with Henry and the horse, but he just gazed at me for a moment and wandered along, not much in tune even with his own business.

"What's wrong with Al?" I asked the wife of the store owner when I stepped up to the register.

"He's been kind of funny. I don't know, ever since Christmas Eve he's had that blank gaze. Contented but blank."

"Beware of the Eyes of March, Marty." Henry popped his head in the kitchen door and then the rest of his person. "How's you doing?"

"A little better before you scared me." I went back to my frying pan.

"That wouldn't be bacon, would it?"

"Your sniffer's off, Henry. All that cold air."

"I'll take anything."

"Pancakes. Plain old pancakes or you make your own dinner."

"Pancakes for dinner?" Shaking his head, he sat down at the kitchen table. "Are you sure no bacon?"

"No bacon."

"You sure eat strange, Marty, but beggars cannot be choosers." He performed the ritual of the hand-washing. "I checked in on Herman and he's fat as can be."

"I'm glad."

"I don't think even a toad should be too fat. A little fat is healthy, mind you, but we're talking tons with Herman. Eating too well and not enough jumping, that's the problem."

"Maybe he's saving up fat in case you take him on the road again."

"That certainly would be keen of him." He dug into his pancakes. "I haven't eaten for two days, do you believe it?"

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"If you say so."

"Some adventure the world is in wintertime. The better for the hounds to see you through the shrubs. I got bit on the calf last week. Don't eat red snow, either, Marty."

"I'll remember that."

Henry set down his utensils and stared at me. "Is there something the matter? It isn't Liz, is it?"

I sighed. What does it matter? I asked myself. He hadn't been obligated to stay for Christmas and, besides, I was going to ask him to leave. Still, he had hurt me.

"Why did you leave before Christmas?"

"Oh, that." He fumbled for the first time. "I knew you'd ask me and I've been thinking long about how to explain it. Mr. Tucker and I had a bit of a—discussion, after which I decided it better to leave."

"Boys will be boys."

"You're still upset with me. I don't blame you. It was a shabby performance and I disgraced our friendship before your daughter."

"I saved the decorations for next year. They were too expensive to throw out."

"Nonsense. Next year we can decorate with cookies and candy. The Germans even use fruit."

"It'll attract rats."

He looked astounded, as if he couldn't understand why someone wouldn't want to attract rats.

I mumbled, "We'll see." I doubted he would be around for next Christmas, yet a part of me accepted the fact that he might be. I suspected with a sixth sort of hooey that he'd always be coming around without notice.

"How's Liz?"

"A's and B's. I'm very proud of her. She's leaning toward a business major."

"If she enjoys that sort of work. To me, mathematical forms are like prison bars."

"The basic bookkeeping for the inn is enough for me. I prefer words. TV isn't bad sometimes. A couple of detective shows compel me every week."

He thought a while, surprised. "Do you realize I haven't watched TV in over ten years? I don't even know who the popular actors are or what series are running. I do catch a flick if one's starting at the moment I pass the theater. I saw one in New York City last summer that I wouldn't mind seeing again."

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I was shocked. For some reason I never imagined Henry traveling to a big city. Once presented, though, I couldn't nail why I hadn't.

"Have you ever been to New York?"

"No," I replied.

"Don't fret. The pace is too fast and the service is lousy. I think reading and dreaming about it is far better than going there."

"How do you afford it?" My bluntness cut my own ears.

Henry laughed. "Now, if I let that slip out everyone would be doing it, wouldn't they? And that would mean the world would stop working and life as we know it would come to a standstill."

"Everyone could take turns," I teased.

He didn't find it humorous. "That's not what is meant to be."

"But you still haven't answered my question."

"Yes, I have."

The final thaw of spring brought Henry back to Mulberry again and from his arrival I felt a sense of relief. I had been waiting for him and consequently worrying that he wouldn't return.

Jenny Hampton of the farming Hamptons out on the route was by for tea when a horn was honked with a bit of rhythm. We hurried out on the porch to view the big shindig and there was Henry, grinning from behind the wheel of an Excalibur. I recognized the jewel because my husband was feverish for the contraptions and what a beautiful contraption this red vessel was.

"Henry!"

"What's up with you, Marty? Haven't you ever seen a car before?"

"It's gorgeous," Jenny murmured as she went down and walked around it. "What on earth is it?"

"An Excalibur directly from California." Henry still hadn't dismounted. Obviously, he was not above thinking himself the cat's meow. "So, Marty, got room for a traveler?"

"The room's just gone up five dollars," I jested, nodding toward the car. "Where'd you steal it?"

"I told you. California." He finally climbed out. "Would you like a ride?" he asked Jenny.

"Gosh, I don't know."

She looked toward me. I was a bit ticked off with Henry. Although Jenny was not jail bait, she was a trifle young for him—and I don't like to admit it, but I was disgusted with him for asking her before me.

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"I don't think you should pass up the chance," I called to Jenny. "Why don't you have Henry drive you home?"

He hopped back into his playtoy and Jenny got in as if it was made of china. The takeoff was something like the space rockets you see on TV.

Henry returned in about an hour, which was a time much stretched for what it really took to go to the Hamptons' and back.

"I think it's a foolish car," I grumbled over the semi-burnt dinner. "And where the hell do you get all this money?"

"Hell?"

"Yes! Where the *hell* do you get all the money?"

"Perhaps from hell."

"I thought we were friends, Henry."

"We are." He was fumbling for the second time. "I can't tell you where or how I get the money or anything else. That's the way life is, Marty. It has nothing to do with how I feel about you."

"Will you tell me someday?"

"Maybe. I can't make any promises."

"You're a typical man. Under all the frogs, you're still a typical man."

He laughed and I found myself laughing, too.

I didn't laugh the next time I saw Jenny. Her eyes were those of Al Tucker, and when she talked to me she seemed to be looking through me.

"Jenny, what's wrong?"

"Wrong?" she repeated. "Nothing." And she wandered off down the street.

Like the store owner's wife had said, "Blank—contented but blank."

This, unlike with Al, I had to take up with someone fixed with the gossip. That, as everyone knew, was Mrs. Pepperson.

"That blasted friend of yours did it," she barked at me as soon as I mentioned Jenny. "She hasn't been the same since he drove her home in that car of his. And Al Tucker hasn't been the same since your friend got hold of him, either."

I was sure it was more than a coincidence myself, but I couldn't figure how Henry could make them like that. "What did he do to them?"

"What did he do? I don't know, maybe he bit them on the neck. He did something to them, that's for sure!"

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"Horsefeathers. I shouldn't even be talking to you. And," I added for a little spice, "vampires don't come out in the daylight—unlike gossiping hags."

I had done myself in with that statement, and I regretted it immediately. I knew that within an hour, probably less, Mrs. Pepperson would have Mulberry informed of my hussy lifestyle and my crazy lover who did strange things to women and men alike. My future was doomed.

"Merry Fourth of July." Henry kissed me on the cheek when he found me in the garage. "Oh, I didn't know you had a car. What a beauty."

"It was my husband's."

"I guess *so*. Men and old Caddies are thick as thieves." He toured it. "I had to scrap the Ex."

"No!" I think I was expressing for my husband more than for myself. "Why?"

"I wore it out."

"That's silly."

"I wear things out fast. Mentally, that is." He crooned over my car. "Maybe we can go for a drive before the fireworks. You do have fireworks in Mulberry, don't you?"

"Some."

"So what do you say?"

"Let's go in the house." I hurried out of the garage without bothering to shut the garage door.

"You've kept that car in mint."

"I never drive it. It probably wouldn't even start."

"No harm in trying."

"I don't think it would." I entered the kitchen and began wiping off the counters. "How's Harmen?"

"Herman," he corrected and raised a brow. "He passed away from old age and fatness."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not."

"I am! He stayed here once, remember?"

"And I told you about the 'I'm sorries,' remember?"

"Yes." I rinsed out the sponge.

"And do you know why 'I'm sorry' is so empty? It's because it really means 'I'm sorry that I'm glad it wasn't me, but I *am* glad.' "

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I could feel him staring at my back. His tone changed. "But Herman was a good bloke. I wish I could have kept him with me."

I forced myself to turn around and look at him. "What would you like for dinner?"

"Why don't we go for a picnic in your Caddy?"

"I don't like picnics."

He chewed on his tongue with his molars and then said calmly, "You're afraid of me, aren't you, Marty?"

"No."

He sprang from the chair and leaned over the table, resting on his knuckles. "After all this time, you're afraid of me. You think I'm going to hurt you, don't you?"

I blubbered something about Tucker and Jenny.

"What?" he bellowed and started around the table. "Just what do you think I did to them?"

"I don't know. But you did something."

"What? What did I do? Did they tell you?"

"No. No!"

"Good." He calmed slightly. "Come with me, Marty. Come and let me show you what I showed them."

"What did you show them?" My mind was conjuring up horrible scenarios.

"I can't *tell* you. I have to show you somewhere where we won't be disturbed." His manner and speech were becoming seductive. "Come on, Marty. I want to teach you how to whistle."

I don't know if it's true that curiosity killed the cat, but it was killing me. Here was this chance to find out what had happened to Tucker and Jenny, yet it was pretty much guaranteed that I'd end up like them. Lizzie had been right and I thanked God she wasn't home. There *was* something wrong with Henry—but that also drew me. What could be wrong with him that could make Tucker and Jenny like they were? They weren't haunted or scarred from abuse yet there was a change. Was it some kind of good change for them or had life been sucked from them? I had to know.

"You promise," I said, "not to hurt me?"

"Of course I do, Marty. I love you. I wouldn't hurt you. In a way I'll sort of be answering the questions I always refused to. Perhaps you'll understand, perhaps you won't, but at least you'll have every answer you've ever wanted to know."

I gave in. He started the Caddy—which was a miracle in

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itself—and we headed off with the picnic basket in the back. My hands trembled and every now and then I shivered. I must be insane, I thought. I was handing myself over on a silver plate to a lunatic. I imagined what Tucker and Jenny's lives must be like as empty seashells, with only a whisper of what used to be. I had gone past the point Lizzie had warned me about.

"How's around here?" Henry broke my thoughts and I jumped noticeably. "Ah, Marty, you're still scared of me."

"No, I'm not."

"You're fibbing." He pulled the car off the road and shut down the system. He dangled the keys for a while and then dropped them in his shirt pocket. "Let's hit those BLT's."

"No," I blurted out. I was filled with more energy than I could remember. "Let's get it over with. What were you going to show me?"

"That's a poor attitude, Marty."

"Just show me!"

He sighed and reached into his inside jacket pocket. He removed a short three-cylinder cigar case. It was basically silver with diamond-cut leaves on the mounds, but someone had added gold mountings and it was heavily jeweled with precious gems. It was much heavier than I expected when he laid it in my palm.

I began to pull out the minute clasp, but he stopped me.

"In that box is the answer to your every question, Marty. To open it will certainly change your life, your future. I don't know *how* it will change it for you. Most people end up like Tucker and Jenny, which isn't bad—not really. They're happy. Contented."

"And the others?"

"Well, most of the others—the others being a small fraction, mind you—are like me."

"And the others?"

"Who knows? Suicide. Mass murderers. I don't know. Anything. It depends on you. It depends on what's inside you, how you react to the answer, what you wanted the answer to be."

I was struck dumb, but I wanted to know everything before I opened the box. As if reading my mind, Henry smiled. "I can't answer you, but what is in the box can. Because in that box is the meaning of life."

I opened the box.

From its luminous gold interior came a sweet breeze laced with

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the essence of my husband's extinct garden. I closed my eyes as emotions danced like curtains in the wind. As I relived the anticipation of my first date with him, my stomach tightened. Then in swept more memories: the mobile of seahorses spinning over my crib, learning to ride a bike on a dirt road, buying my daughter's first school clothes, and dozens of other moments I had lost. Then I was overcome with a chill as memories turned into premonitions of Lizzie living in a big city and never marrying, the medicinal smell of a nursing home. As if in a dream, I died—not waking up until I realized I was dead as sassafras tea. At which, I only laughed. I laughed and laughed and laughed as if I had discovered it was what had been most important to know all along.

I opened my eyes and stared at Henry's back. He was leaning on the snoot of the Caddy, calmly waiting. He wasn't in my future.

I joined him in the twilight and handed him the case. His gaze was crucial and then a Herman-type grin crept across his face. "Keep it," he said, forcing it back into my hands. "Someday you might want to show it to someone."

"Where did you get it?"

"Five years ago I stole a Buick beater and was racing down some killer-steep dirt hill, and as I spun into the curve I faced off with a granddaddy of a black Lincoln. It swerved off the road into a tree. After I helped the driver out, he gave me the cigar case with a curse that I needed it more than him and I opened it. Frankly, I didn't like what I saw but I understood. Before the gent took the bags of money from the trunk of the Lincoln and drove off in the Buick, he left me with strict instructions that I was only to keep it in my possession until I found someone who truly understood. You're to do the same." He paused to chuckle. "You see, the only genuine mackintosh is the raw material. Your own mind does all the rest."

He fished for the car keys.

"Where—?"

"I'm going to check out those big ghostly mountains in those Burman countries I saw in a magazine once."

"But I don't understand about—"

"Why are Jenny and Al so zombie-brained? They want someone else's life and they know their expectations are futile. When they can put a pin in their balloons they'll float down to the sea of normal. You and I might not like what or who we are but we accept it." He handed me the car keys. "The steering needs adjusting. Oh, and Marty, try to laugh a little more often."

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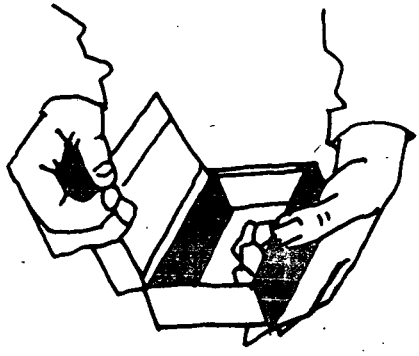
So old Henry proved a mile sappier than I had a gallbladder for and he walked, as they don't say, into the fireworks.

I started the car and turned it around toward home. Faintly, I heard a hum. Then, a fraction louder, there was a distinct whistle. It was just one off-key note but it was a whistle. A measure, a phrase, and soon I was whistling a tune.



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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

Miles' last girl friend smiled at people a good deal too much as far as he was concerned.

"I expect you imagined it," Deborah told him. "Anyway, you didn't own her."

"No?" he said . . .

MY LAST GIRL FRIEND

by ROBERT BARNARD

"That's my last girl friend," said Miles when he caught Deborah looking at the framed snap on the side table.

They were together on Miles's specially roomy sofa, and neither of them had a stitch on, though Miles had managed to retain his Sagittarius charm. Already Deborah was talking in terms of moving in. She was somehow on top of him when she spotted the photograph and she swiveled round to sit by his long legs and look at it.

"She looks nice," she said unrancorously. "Sort of pleasant—smiling."

Miles turned and looked, apparently unconcerned, at the picture of him in full boating rig, standing beside the smiling girl.

"Oh, yes," he said. "She smiled, all right."

"Who took the snap?"

"My pater. He's about sixty-five, so you can get *that* thought out of your head."

"Oh, I didn't mean— What a funny thing to say. After all, you can smile at people without meaning *that,* can't you?"

Miles curled his very handsome lip. "Can you? I don't know that *she* could. She smiled at people a good deal too much, as far as I was concerned."

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"I expect you imagined it. Anyway, you didn't own her."

"No?"

There was silence for a moment. Miles was now at one end of the sofa, his knees drawn up under his chin. Deborah was squatting at the other end, still looking at the picture.

"No," she said, in her best attempt at a decisive voice. "Of course she's got a right to behave how she likes to other people."

"Matter of opinion," said Miles off-handedly. "It was the *way* she smiled I objected to."

"Don't be daft. A smile is a smile."

"No, it's not. Most people have many different ways of smiling. Not her, though. First thing I'd notice was she'd smile at some old newspaper seller who'd sold her the *Evening News*. Who'd bother to smile at some smelly old git like that? Then I'd take her to some Stock Exchange function and she'd smile when I introduced her to my boss."

"Well?"

"In exactly the same way."

"Well, why not? Shows she was friendly."

"Friendly! —Then I'd catch her at the window there, looking at the sunset, and the silly creature would have the same smile, exactly the same smile, on her face. Who the hell smiles at sunset on the Thames Valley?"

"She just liked sunsets, I suppose."

"But what really got me, *really* got me, was when I realized that when I came down to breakfast in the morning, or when I got home at night, she'd smile at me—*me*—in exactly the same way."

"What did you expect?"

"Something different! Something to show that I was something special in her life! Was she my girl, or was she not? I didn't take up with her to be treated exactly the same as a bloody setting sun!"

"You could have told her. Talked it over with her."

"I wouldn't stoop so low."

"She looks awfully young. If you'd told her what was niggling you, you could have made her understand."

"It would have come to an argument. I couldn't have had that. I never argue with people. If she didn't understand *naturally* what I had a right to expect, she'd never understand at all."

"I think you're a pig. I suppose you got rid of her."

"That is pre*cise*ly what I did."

"Just threw her over."

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"Not exactly, though it's an idea. Let's just say that I stopped her smiles altogether."

Deborah had been getting restless for some minutes. That last remark of Miles, said with a catlike smile on his handsome face, made her sit in silence for some moments. Then she reached for her tights and bra.

"What did you mean, about stopping her smiles altogether?" she asked, in a voice that came out small and tight.

"Just what I said. I made sure she never smiled at me or anyone else like that again. Ever."

"You don't mean you—*did* something to her?"

"I should be so stupid! I'd have been the first one they came for, wouldn't I? Still, something had to be done, that was for sure. I couldn't have her talking about me to other men—laughing at me."

Deborah had her skirt on now and was reaching for her blouse. "What did you do?"

"I've got friends. I was at a gala concert at the Festival Hall that night. At the reception afterwards— But they're good friends. I'd do the same for them. For quite a small consideration, they did what had to be done. There was nothing to connect them with her, you see. They'd never met her. It all went off very smoothly."

"I don't believe this. This isn't happening."

But she had got her handbag, and was turning to the chair where she had slung her coat. Miles shrugged, still with the same self-absorbed smile on his face. "As you like," he said.

"You wouldn't—have someone *killed* just because they didn't give you the—*devotion* you wanted."

"I can't think of a more terrible failure, in someone *I* had chosen."

She was at the door. Bravely, she turned and said: "You'd have to be a *monster.*"

"Perhaps there is just a little part of me that is. But a frightfully handsome monster, don't you think? Why don't you come back, just for a while?"

Negligently, beautifully, he started up from the sofa. Deborah turned on her heels, wrenched open the door, and fled, her high heels making a clap-clapping sound as she trundled herself down the stairs.

Miles lay back on the sofa, still smiling in self-contentment. An English degree at Oxford had been no sort of preparation for a career on the Stock Exchange, but he never regretted having been forced

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to read "My Last Duchess." It had been invaluable in getting rid of girl friends who had started becoming proprietorial.

Lazily, still smiling, he leaned round and turned the snapshot of his sister and himself, taken at Henley, face-down on the side table.

He'd never liked his sister's silly smile.

DETECTIVERSE

HEADY EXPERIENCES

by CAROL CAIL

The murderer brained Sir John Tatter
With Mrs. T's pewterware platter.
Since push came to shove,
This was a case of,
Unmistakeably, mind under matter.

Shortly the butler was found
In the gym, with a barbell well crowned.
Some bad so-and-so—
The "heavy," you know—
Had been throwing some real weight around.

But the killer soon sang his last song
When escape by the lift went all wrong.
His head caught in the door
As it dropped a full floor—
You might say that his flight was headlong.

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Victor Santiago had been quick and to the point. "Kid, you know who this is, so don't bother yelling or hanging up. We don't want the money back. You embarrassed us and only your head's going to make us feel better. My bro, he thinks he has style, which is why you aren't bleeding right now. He wants to see you squirm. He wants to see you run. Well, he's my older brother and I'll allow him that. So run, little man. We're going to enjoy chasing you and watching you sweat . . ."

DRIVEN

by BRENDAN DuBOIS

Harris drove his Buick down the narrow dirt road, the trees and bushes looking unreal in the harshness of the car's headlights. The road was bumpy, causing the car's shocks to squeal in protest, and he nibbled on his lower lip as he steered deeper into the woods. He had scouted out this place when it was light, and now, well, suppose there was somebody there, somebody watching when he stopped and got out? A cop on patrol? Some teenage couple parking? Or somebody from the brothers.

Knock it off, he thought, slowing the car as the road widened. Get this done and in a few minutes we'll be back on the highway, heading north. He was in Massachusetts. He was running out of places to drive to.

There was a row of boulders at one end of the road and he pulled over, switching off the car's engine. He reached beside him for his revolver and sawed-off shotgun and got out of the car, allowing himself a few minutes to let his eyes adjust to the darkness. Trees were all around him, rustling in the wind, and he walked to the trunk, placing the shotgun on the car roof. He took one more look

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around before shoving the revolver into his belt and opening the trunk.

The sudden glare from the trunk light blinded him for a moment, then he reached in and grabbed at the bound feet of the dead man lying there.

He had been in his early twenties, Harris guessed, and worked at a gas station in one of the nearby towns. He was wearing jeans and a workshirt with *Skip* stitched over one pocket, but Harris doubted that was his real name. That morning he had come after him with a tire iron and Harris had shot him.

A mess—it had been a real mess. The gunshot and the driving away, the body hidden in the trunk. Forget it—he tugged at the legs until they hung over the trunk lip—it's over with. Let's take care of it and *go*.

He had used large green-plastic garbage bags to wrap the body, using twine he had bought at a hardware store. He supposed he could have left the body at the gas station, but he knew the man had worked for the Santiago brothers. He tugged again at the legs and there was a moist noise from the plastic. Time to put some fear into the brothers. They send someone after Harris and the man disappears, he's nowhere to be found.

" 'Cause I'm good and I take care of myself," he said aloud. He clenched his teeth and pulled at the soggy weight again. The body rolled over and tumbled to the ground. The noise of it striking the dirt made his hands tremble.

He reached into the trunk and pulled out two cinder blocks—one, two—and tied them to the man's feet, over the oily, stained workboots. A good disguise, right down to the workboots. The brothers were good, that was for sure—they had proved it again and again over the past years. But he was better.

After pulling on a pair of workgloves, he dragged the body to the line of boulders. He peered over the edge, down past the craggy rocks and bushes he could see in the light from the open trunk. An abandoned and water-filled quarry. As good a place as any. In another minute the body was up, over, and done with, a loud smack announcing its arrival into the water. Harris went back to the car and cleaned out the newspapers that had sopped up the man's blood. They went into a garbage bag and into the water.

He slammed the trunk-lid down, resisting an urge to look into the compartment behind the spare tire. He leaned back against the trunk and stared up at the stars and hugged himself tight, as if he

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were trying to squeeze out all the memories of the past year. God, how did he get here, from a thirty-thousand job in Los Angeles to a small town in Massachusetts, with nothing except a battered car, some greasy clothing, and a small arsenal of firearms?

"Easy, you nitwit," he whispered. "You forgot to list the goodies."

Ah, yes, the goodies. In a compartment behind the spare tire were two identical briefcases crammed with money so hot it should have turned into ashes months ago. Close to a half million dollars, all of it crisp and new, all of it stolen.

He shivered from the chillness of the night and went back inside the car. In half an hour he was on the highway, heading north. Along the way, he listened to a radio talk show from out of Boston. He started giggling, listening to some bored housewives complain about their lives. John, can't you understand, John, our lives have no excitement? they called in. No drama. No meaning. John, the host, said "hmm" a lot.

Well, Harris thought, passing a station wagon and keeping his speed at fifty-five, let's talk about a life with too much drama and damn too much meaning. He imagined himself in a different car, a luxury car like a Cadillac or a BMW, with a car phone. He would call up the radio station and talk to John.

"John, meboy," he'd say, "it's like this. A year ago I was out West, working as a junior accountant for this company. Well, it was more like a partnership. Between Victor and his brother Hugh Santiago. A nice little import/export business, if you catch my drift. So I'm there, pulling in thirty grand a year, and one night I'm catching up on some books and I go into their offices and there are the two briefcases, stuffed full of money. I mean, they got so much money that they're practically glowing in the dark."

A Firebird passed him, going at least seventy, followed by a Thunderbird. Two more birds in flight.

"Time to make the decision to run?" he continued, knowing with disgust that his voice was getting shrill. "A matter of seconds. There was all that money, just waiting to be scooped up, money that could set me up anywhere and anyhow I wanted. And John, that money wasn't exactly clean, you know? I mean that money was hot and dirty. The Santiago brothers aren't members of the Better Business Bureau."

He stopped talking. His throat hurt, his arms and back hurt, and his eyelids felt like they were swollen with lead. He'd have to get some sleep soon.

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In the rearview mirror the lights from the other cars stretched behind him, like some magical chain that reached back over the last hill. Yeah, they reached back all right, all the way back to L.A., to when he put the briefcases in his car and took off. Smart. You thought you were smart back then, didn't you? Went up to some small fishing town in Oregon, changed your name, slept late, and got lazy. Until one night—it was a Monday night, wasn't it?—the phone rang and it was Victor Santiago. He'd been quick and to the point.

"Kid, you know who this is, so don't bother yelling or hanging up. We don't want the money back. You embarrassed us and only your head's going to make us feel better. My bro, he thinks he has style, which is why you aren't bleeding right now. He wants to see you squirm. He wants to see you run. Well, he's my older brother and I'll allow him that. So run, little man. We're going to enjoy chasing you and watching you sweat."

So the drive was on. From Washington to Idaho and through the states—the Dakotas and to the South, drive, drive, drive, and all the time the Santiagos' boys and girls were after him. He'd learned a lot the past year—how far the car could go on a tank of gas, how far he could go on a cheeseburger and fries. He never stopped long. For three weeks once he stayed in a motel in Kentucky, until his room phone rang and he got out the door by the seventh ring, knowing who was on the other end. He had learned how to drive hard and how to use the revolver and shotgun, and he had used them many times. The Santiago brothers were out to get even in a big way. Even though by luck and new skills, he'd taken care of more than a dozen of the brothers' employees, he had no doubt that more would come.

He yawned, blinked his eyes, and sat up in terror as the highway's guard rails grew large and bright in his headlights. He stomped on the brake and swung the wheel to the left. Close, much too close. Time to crash—the next hotel, cabins, whatever. He didn't feel like sleeping in the back seat tonight. He wanted sheets surrounding him, the crisp-clean motel sheets that always smelled of soap and disinfectant. Even for one night they were a luxury. Some days he drove and drove, eating only at fast-food driveins and taking catnaps on dirt roads, because he had the feeling they were right on his heels. But he'd handled that gas-station attendant well enough—he hoped that would give him a grace period.

After another mile, he crossed the state border and came upon a

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motel/diner. He pulled into the back lot, under some trees, and got a room for the night. In his room, he locked the doors and windows and blocked both doors with chairs. He slept with the shotgun on the nightstand and the revolver under his pillow. He dreamed in shades of red and black.

He awoke with the familiar sense of terror, of being adrift in darkness, and he was upright with the revolver in his hands before he remembered where he was. He took a long shower, luxuriating in the soap and hot water, but he felt soiled again when he put on his greasy clothes. He sat for a moment on the unmade bed, staring at the dark-green carpet. All this, all this running, and for what? He'd never really enjoyed the money, using it for gas and food and the occasional motel room. Many times he thought of shipping the money back, but he always recalled what Victor Santiago had said. They didn't care about the money. Some choice. Run with the money or run without it. He'd much rather run with it. And where could he live, when it had been so easy for them to find him in Oregon? Not much more he could do than stay a moving target.

Yeah, boy, but where you running to?

"To breakfast," he said. After hiding the shotgun in a closet and putting the revolver into his waistband, he put on a jacket and stepped outside. As an afterthought, he slipped a Do Not Disturb sign on the door before locking it.

At the diner, he bought a newspaper and took a rear booth, facing the door. He took his revolver out and placed it on the padded bench, hiding it with the paper. His waitress was a middle-aged woman, wearing a stained pink dress with a white apron, her face fleshy and heavily made up. He ordered scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee, and while he ate he looked around the diner, watching everyone, watching for the strange glance, the quick movement of hands. There were some single diners and a group of truck drivers over by the door, wearing jeans and cowboy hats, and their voices were very loud. He ate quickly. It was a funny thing. When he was on the road he wanted nothing more than to stop and rest, but when he was resting he wanted to get back on the road. Here he was sitting still—he was a target.

He scraped up the rest of the eggs with a piece of toast and looked up. His waitress was on the other side of the diner, talking to the cook. He waited, drumming his fingers on the tabletop. What was taking her so long? He just wanted to pay the damn check and get

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moving, get on the road and put some miles behind him. The diner door slammed open and his hand went to the paper, but it was only a couple of kids, laughing as they went to the candy counter.

C'mon, c'mon. Her back was still to him and she was sprawled over the long counter, hip poking out, gabbing with the cook. She was talking and talking, ignoring him. The door slammed open again and this time the pistol reached his lap. This time it was a young girl, carrying a baby. He was done, he wanted *out*—what was taking the waitress so long?

She was ignoring him. She wanted him to stay in his seat. He was being set up. "Hey!" he shouted, and his hand tightened on the pistol as the heads of the customers swiveled to him. "How about my check, hunh?"

The waitress's face matched the color of her uniform as she stalked down the aisle, ripping his check off her pad and slamming it on his table, making the dishes rattle. She turned and went back up the aisle, swearing under her breath, and there were some whistles and catcalls from the truckers. Harris put the pistol surreptitiously back into his waistband and threw a ten-dollar bill on the table. Time to get his bag and get out of here.

As he walked back to the motel room, he smelled something odd in the air and felt his pulse quicken. Something was in the air. Something was close and coming closer. The walkway was deserted, but his back tingled, as if hidden eyes were staring at him. He walked faster.

The Do Not Disturb sign was missing. The door was ajar. He stopped, slowly pulling the revolver out, keeping it low and behind his leg.

He threw the door open and hunched down, but before he could bring up his gun, he saw a woman in the room, in a dark-brown dress and apron, gazing at him with her mouth open, a bundle of sheets in her arms. He stood up and went inside, closing the door behind him. He kept the gun behind his leg.

"Who the hell are you?"

"The maid." She was in her twenties and her face looked familiar. Of course. A daughter. She was the daughter of the woman who had been his waitress.

Who had been delaying him.

"Why'd you come in? The sign was out."

She squeezed the sheets about her. "I'm sorry, mister. I guess I

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was in a hurry and I wanted to get these rooms done. Sometimes the guests, well, they leave and forget to take those signs down."

"Sure." He took a few steps back until he reached the television set. He switched it on. "Are you almost done?"

"Yes, sir. I just gotta check on your towels."

She went around the bed, dropping the sheets and going into the bathroom. He turned up the volume of the television. He took a deep breath, waiting for her to come back.

When she stepped out from the bathroom, carrying folded towels in her arms, he saw a glint of metal in her hands and he brought up his gun and shot her. The towels flew out of her hands and she crumpled with no sound.

Her gun, he thought, going over to her. Get her gun in case she's still alive. She was motionless when he reached her, dead. There was no gun. A set of keys were on the floor next to her.

He knelt down, his stomach tightening, his breakfast suddenly rolling inside him. Keys. All she had were keys. He slumped down and sat next to the body, staring at the bright bundle of metal. A moment later, he sat up. There, what was that, on the largest key? He peered closely at the key. There was a smudge of something brown on the tip. It looked sticky. He got up from the floor, smiling, and started to pack his things. Of course. Poison. There was poison on the key. She was going to walk past him and scratch him with the key and kill him. She was one of them. She was working for the Santiago brothers.

He filled his suitcase, stealing some of the towels that were scattered on the floor. His stomach felt better. She was like all the rest from the Santiago brothers, all out to kill him. Like that gas-station boy, who actually said one of his tires needed changing. He could tell the boy was lying and he took care of him right there in the service bay. And the girl hitchhiker in New York. He found a knife in her purse after he'd dumped her body in the river. The elderly couple who'd flagged him down on the highway in Missouri, pretending their car had broken down. The mother and her two young boys in Nevada who said they were going to the market and needed a ride. They were all such good actors.

He locked the door and walked naturally to his car, breathing in the cool morning air. He had handled himself well again. There was nothing to do but keep on driving and take care of anyone who got in his way.

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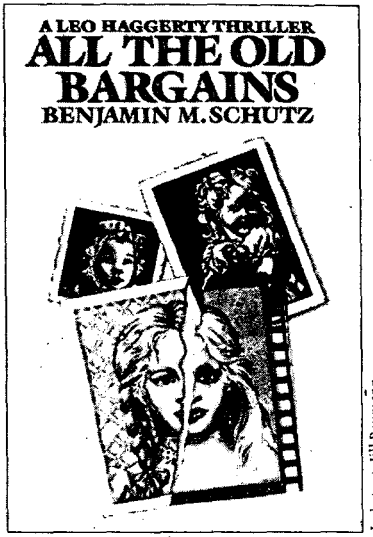

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

I have two rules I should tell you about. First, I don't buy new crime fiction; enough comes my way for review. Second—and this may seem a tad unnecessary in view of the first—I don't review mysteries I buy; this is on the theory that books that want reviewing will be sent to me.

So much for rules. An annual high event of my reading is the year's Dick Francis. *Break-In* (Putnam, $17.95), his latest, did not come in. So I bought it. I read it in one sitting. All 317 pages. I might have killed to avoid interruption. I predict a similar experience for you. *Break-In* has to do with Kit Fielding, steeplechase jockey. And with Bobby Allerdeck, trainer. The Allerdecks and Fieldings have hated each other, with blinding intensity, for generations. Allerdeck married Holly, Kit's sister. Allerdeck's father therefore denounced him, and Holly's beloved uncle, who raised her, turned his back on her. Then someone began to attack Bobby in the press, in the scurrilous *Daily Flag*. Holly asked Kit for help. What follows must be read, not summarized or hinted at by me. Over to you.

Come Morning by Joe Gores (Mysterious Press, $15.95), his seventh novel and first in eight years, is the story of Runyon, now coming out of San Quentin after a stretch for heisting $2 million in diamonds—diamonds never recovered. Various unrighteous folks would like to relieve Runyon of the loot, so he goes about with several malignant shadows. Is there anyone he can trust? The guy he pulled the job for, a Vietnam buddy? The woman who's turned up, invading his bed and wedging her way into his heart? The insurance investigator? How can he stay alive when these people find out what's really become of the stones? This is an expertly plotted suspense story, and Runyon is a magnificently realized creation: hard ex-con, human being, survivor.

Miles Tripp has written crime fiction since the 1960s but only in recent years has his work much reached these shores, courtesy of St. Martin's Press. The latest is *Some Predators Are Male* ($12.95). This tells about Neil Pensom, an ordinary fellow going through harrowing and baffling experiences, an approach mindful of Martin Russell and L. P. Davies. And if Tripp's resolution is not so rewarding as his buildup, *Predators* is still well worth a couple of hours. Pensom comes for help to London private investigator John Samson: Pensom's story is that, among other things, he's been kidnaped by apparent Russians who think he's a spy, and he's been followed by a strange woman who claims to be his wife. Samson wonders if Pen-

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som needs a shrink more than a private detective: he shortly finds out which.

Singapore is one of the most engaging of John Ball's novels about black Pasadena detective Virgil Tibbs, introduced in the Edgar-winning *In the Heat of the Night (1965)* and triumphantly transferred to the screen by Sidney Poitier. Tibbs had earlier helped protect the wife of the President of a small but strategic African nation. Now she's a widow and charged with murder in Singapore. The situation is politically explosive, and she asks for Virgil, who's recovering from a gunshot wound. The CIA wants him there, too, but he goes more because of personal feelings for Miriam Motamburu than patriotism. On arrival, he finds the scene perilous as well as political, perilous to life and heart. Most of the violence and conflict is offstage or understated, as is typical with Ball, but this is a good story in a setting well evoked.

Amos McGuffin, you may recall, is the S.F. private eye who's always sober when on a case, never sober when not. He's rarely sober. In *Dead on a Stick* by Robert Upton (Viking, $15.95), the bleary-eyed McGuffin is approached by a lawyer, a member of the vastly expensive and exclusive Palm Isle Golf Club, which resides on a small island off Florida. One of its members has died, ostensibly of a heart attack, and another, risen to wealth from unsavory roots to which dirt still attaches, seems to be maneuvering to control the club. Would McGuffin—who was once quite a good golfer—be willing to go to the club as the lawyer's guest and investigate these matters? Pinching himself to make sure he's not experiencing d.t.'s, Amos says yes, and off to paradise he goes, to find it's not far from hell, with dying by no means done. This caper is probably not intended to be believed, and I didn't, but I enjoyed it well nonetheless.

Philip Loraine's *Loaded Questions* (St. Martin's, $12.95) is an absorbing exploration of the manipulative world of intrigue. Isaac Erter was a charismatic Israeli leader devoted to bringing peace to his nation and the Middle East. This was unsatisfactory to someone who, despite elaborate security precautions, had Erter shot to death. Now, some time later, two renowned investigative reporters in England pick up the traces of the story, which was officially suppressed, and begin asking questions in London, in Paris, in Israel. Who killed Erter, and, finally, who is pulling whose strings for what purpose?

Ed McBain's sixth novel about Florida lawyer Matthew Hope is *Cinderella* (Holt, $14.95). This is filled with crude characters—drug dealers, enforcers, hookers, philanderers—talking crudely and convincingly, so colorfully unappealing Floridians and their four-letter vocabularies are the fare here. A prostitute has stolen a valuable watch from a client and left him a present in its place; he urgently wants to track her down. A hooker has lifted a fortune in cocaine from Florida's most successful distribu-

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tor; he has his knife-wielding minions carving their way to her. Hope retains a nice-guy private-eye to follow the husband of a client; the eye becomes the story's first murder victim. McBain brings this all together very ably.

Time for another roundup of highlights in recent criminous reprinting activity. First, in hardcovers, ten more in Dodd Mead's Winterbrook Editions of Agatha Christie, including *The Mysterious Affair at Styles, The A.B.C. Murders,* and *A Murder Is Announced* ($12.95 each).

Next a selection of worthy paperbacks. From Academy, *Major Enquiry* by Laurence Henderson, *The Lady and Her Doctor* by Evelyn Piper, *The Second Curtain* and *Verdict of Twelve* by Raymond Postgate, *Such Is Death* by Leo Bruce, *The Killer Breath* by John Wyllie, and *The Tall Dark Man* by Anne Chamberlain ($4.95 each). From Bantam, *Last Respects* by Catherine Aird, *Bad for Business* by Rex Stout, and *Mosley by Moonlight* and *Murder, Mr. Mosley* by John Greenwood ($2.95 each). From Signet, *Strike Three, You're Dead* (an Edgar winner) by R. D. Rosen and *Smoke Detector* by Eric Wright ($2.95 each), plus *When the Bough Breaks* (another Edgar winner) by Jonathan Kellerman ($3.95).

From Penguin, *The Memorial Hall Murder* and *Dark Nantucket Moon* by Jane Langton and *McGarr and the Sienese Conspiracy* by Bartholomew Gill ($3.95 each), plus *Brandstetter & Others* by Joseph Hansen, *Waiting for the End of the World* by Andrew Taylor, *The Long Journey Home* by Michael Gilbert, and *Pearlhanger* by Jonathan Gash ($3.50 each). From St. Martin's, *Laguna Heat* by T. Jefferson Parker ($4.50) and *A Cool, Clear Death* by Tucker Halleran ($3.50).

From Charter, *The Touch of Treason* by Sol Stein ($3.95). From Henry Holt, *Three with a Bullet* and *At the Hands of Another* by Arthur Lyons ($3.95 each). From Perennial, *The Ascent of D-13* and *Two if by Sea* by Andrew Garve, and *The Crack in the Teacup* and *The Family Tomb* by Michael Gilbert ($3.50 each). From Paper-Jacks, *Print-Out* by Robert B. Gillespie ($2.95). From Popular Library, *Blunt Darts* by Jeremiah Healy ($3.50). From Berkley, *Footsteps in the Dark* by Georgette Heyer ($2.95), in its first U.S. appearance. And from Avon, *The Ghost Way* by Tony Hillerman ($2.95).

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a *NEW* short story by

ERNEST SAVAGE

Outside, over the front door facing the drive, was a wooden sign inscribed in deeply burnt letters: McCREERY & SON. CASE MAKERS. Invisible from the street, useless as advertising, the sign was another unsolved puzzle to Patrick. His father—the "Son" of the sign—had never set foot in the town, let alone the shop. Irish whimsy, perhaps—Gramps was loaded with it . . .

SING WHAT IS WELL MADE

by ERNEST SAVAGE

The morning sun, slanting through the window behind Chief Olsen's back, made a halo out of the remaining strands of his dead white hair and laid a blaze of golden light across his neat and tidy desk.

This was a ritual meeting neither of us would or could enjoy: the chief saying goodbye to one of his retiring men, a department tradition. He squirmed in his padded swivel chair and I sat restlessly in the chair beside his desk. Our eyes drifted, met, and drifted again.

"So, McCreery," he said.

He still hated the name, it still stuck in his throat. He had said, almost exactly twenty years ago, "McCreery, you've got black Irish blood in your veins, father and grandfather both felons, mother dead of the booze. I doubt you'll last a week on the force. I'm a damn fool for giving you the chance."

But he'd had no choice. I'd passed all the required tests, I'd lived in the town all my life and had friends who counted. Still, it had been a dare on my part then, as well as a mission—a kind of sneer at him and Fate both. He'd been the cop who arrested my father and dragged my mother's body out from the gutter where she'd died.

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Both events years before that day, but not forgotten. Even now, not forgotten. Not by him, anyway. He had no sense of humor, a cop's best friend.

"So, McCreery—Patrick—what now? What are your plans? You're still a young man."

"I've got this cabin in the Sierra," I said. "Mountain City. I'll live there.. Gramps left it to me when he died. Gramps—Frank McCreery." I was feeling the first wild oats of freedom. "You remember him, Chief, I'm sure—our famous cat-burglar." I felt free to smile a little, too. Frank McCreery, still a ranking—and rankling—name in the annals of local crime. All that loot never found, never a dime recovered. That's my plan, Chief, to find it.

"Ah, yes," Olsen said. "When did the old man die, Patrick?"

"Two years ago," I said. Hell, he knew to the day, if not the very hour, when Frank McCreery died. A dead McCreery was the only good McCreery. "He was eighty-eight," I said, and stood up. Enough of this. "After a rich and full life, Chief."

"A life of crime, Patrick, remember that." Olsen didn't rise from his chair or extend a hand. The awkward meeting was over. So were the awkward twenty years.

The cabin was old and small and needed work. But as Frank once told me, "Stout as the Ark, me boy, every stick in her redwood, noblest tree of 'em all." He had, of course, built it himself. He'd had good hands, a craftsman's hands—when they weren't being a thief's.

I parked my aging pickup in the curving rutted drive in front of the cabin and stared at the place for a while. My paltry pension was insufficient by far to the task of fixing it up. But such as it was, it was mine, free of debt and probably, being redwood, termites. Old Gramps, having outlived both my parents and lacking another heir, had left the place to me by default. Hobson's choice. I had spent two full summers here, my eleventh and twelfth, and had known him as well as a boy can know a man—but after that, until he died, there had been only a few terse, equivocal letters between us, nothing more. For me in that long interval, a jailed and finally murdered father, a drunken, wandering, and finally dead mother, foster homes, a sketchy education, and ambiguous work as a cop. Gramps had hated my being a cop.

I got out of the truck and unlocked the front door of the cabin for the first time in a year. I sniffed the trapped air, left the door open, went in, and opened the windows. Had I been a woman, I'd've thrown

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up my hands at the bachelor disarray of the place. But I warmed to it at once, uncritical. Each of the past two years, I'd spent my vacation here and knew every crevice, nook, and cranny, had searched them all. It was home now—a bedroom, a bath, a walk-through kitchen to a back door off the paneled, clubby main room, heavy with home-built furniture. A black-mouthed fieldstone fireplace, flanked by bookshelves, filled the west-facing wall. Frank had been a reader.

In the center of the east wall of the room was the door to his workshop—what would have been for another man an attached two-car garage. I swung that door open next, loosing the musty air, still redolent of wood, varnish, and lacquer—and maybe the sweat of his hands. I had searched it, too, every drawer and shelf, under every bench. Outside, over the front door of this room, facing the drive, was a wooden sign inscribed in deeply burnt letters: McCREERY & SON. CASE MAKERS. Invisible from the street, useless as advertising, the sign was another unsolved puzzle to me. My father—the "Son" of the sign—had never set foot in the town, let alone the shop. Irish whimsy, perhaps—Gramps was loaded with it—or irony.

I had bought a large box of basic foods from Safeway on my way through town and carried it in from the truck. A week ago I'd ordered the juice turned on and the fridge—old but tough—worked when I plugged it in. Then I ferried in the rest of my stuff—stereo and tape deck, a half dozen framed prints for Frank's barren walls, and a few books of my own; the clothes last. I had them over both arms when Elmo Smith, still straight as a lodge-pole but showing age in the knees, came up my drive. His rake-handle thinness had always amazed me. Where did he keep his air? He would be in his mid-eighties now, and lived across the road in a house even smaller than this, hidden among the tall pines. He was an old friend of Frank's, but not of mine.

I waited for him, preparing to smile.

"So you're here," he said from ten feet away.

"I'm here, Elmo. Come on in, I'll buy you a drink."

He had under his left arm a black looseleaf notebook. He proffered it, but I had no free hand to take it. "This is yours," he said. "Frank asked me to give it to you when you got here for good—if ever you did."

"C'mon in," I repeated. "I'm here for good."

"You got whisky?"

"I got whisky . . ."

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He sat on the big wood-framed couch beneath the front windows and put the notebook on the coffee table at his knees. I'd made a couple of tall scotch-and-waters. It would be hours before I had cubes to cool the drinks, but he didn't complain, emptying half the glass in a gulp. "What is it?" I asked, pointing at the book. The old-fashioned leatherette cover was scratched and worn.

"Hell, I don't know—a ledger, a diary, a journal. A bunch of notes and figures and dates."

"You've read it?"

He glared at me, needlessly offended. "Well, he didn't tell me not to, Patrick."

"Nor would I have, Elmo. Nor do I."

But he breathed enmity. He'd not drunk courteously of his scotch. He'd bolted the first half, now he bolted the rest. There was something heavy on his mind. Blurting, he got it off. "What the hell did you want to be a cop for, f'r chrisakes?"

I'd thought that was it—or part of it, anyway—and answered carefully. "Well, Elmo, there was a time when most Irishmen were cops, crooks, or priests. I lacked the calling to be a priest and the guts to be a crook." I shrugged, smiling.

"He hated you for it, especially working for that bastard, Olsen. He wanted to give this place to me, but I had one already and told him to give it to you."

"To redeem me."

"Christ, you're not even married—what's to redeem?" With some of the load removed, he felt better and shoved his glass over to fill again. I took it and said,

"Marriage is not the reliable evidence of moral virtue it used to be, Elmo. If it ever was. But I've had my girls."

"You're at war with yourself," he said sharply. "All you goddamn Irishmen are. Frank was, too, but he found his peace. So was your father."

"Oh? You knew my father?" I was surprised, standing stiffly with two empty glasses in my hands. My father had died when I was thirteen, knifed to death in San Quentin.

"No, I didn't, but Frank told me all about him. Get on with the drinks."

I did, and sat back down opposite him. He knew more about my family than I knew. Questions swirled in my mind. I asked one. "Elmo, how come Frank made that sign read 'McCreery & Son'?"

He drank an inch of lightly watered scotch. Where it went in that

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slat-thin frame was a wonder. "He was in jail at the time, your father. Frank wanted him to come up here when he got out—clean up his life and so forth. It was a hope writ in wood," he added, rendered poetic by booze.

"Maybe," I said. "But also it has the ring of permanence, doesn't it, of continuum. Maybe it was just old Frank being slick, dodging the Devil."

"Could be." He shrugged lopsidedly, all one hundred and ten pounds of his six feet suddenly drunk. It seemed a propitious time to ask the longest-lived question of all. I pounced.

"Elmo, where'd he hide the loot? You know, don't you?"

"What loot?"

"Don't evade. The jewels. The gold he swiped they never found."

"They never proved it, Patrick."

"The hell they didn't. He spent four years in the can for it."

"Circumstanshul evidence." He grinned sloppily.

"So where?"

"He never told me and I never asked. Hell, I loved the man. Older brother I never had. Hell of a fisherman."

"Hell of a thief, too. Your old-style cat-burglar. He's still a legend down below. Olsen still hates the name—which is mine as well."

"Betrayed, betrayed!"

"Nuts, Elmo. Where's the loot?"

"That's all that's on your mind, ain't it, Patrick? Come on your vacation last two years to ferret it out, not to fish, not to—"

"I fished. I hunted."

"For the gold an' jewels, you hunted. An' what would you've done with it if you'd found it?" He glared at me. "How would it salvage your life?"

"It would salvage this house, Elmo, if nothing else. New kitchen, new bath. New roof. This one leaks like a birdcage."

"You live too soft. Frank never spent a dime of it on the house or anything else."

"That you know of."

"I would've known. He did all his own fixin', wore the same damn clothes for thirty years, never owned a car. Besides, he took gold from the river, too. We both did."

"So have I, but just a thimble of dust in two years. Not living money."

"He was better at it than you. He was better at everything than you."

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"A better thief, for sure."

He finished his drink and banged the glass on the table. He stood up, fell back down, and stood up again, the spin of the earth too swift on the first try. If he was stiff enough I could have hurled him back to his house like a javelin. He got to the door and turned. "Letter in that notebook for you," he said. "Jes under the cover. Eddie Turner brought it a coupla days ago." Then he left.

Eddie Turner would be the mailman. A week ago I'd also notified the post office I'd be taking my mail here, the little I get.

It was a letter addressed to McCreery & Son, Mountain City, Ca. It had been forwarded to my old address and reforwarded here. McCreery & Son still got mail, ten or so letters a year, but it was dwindling fast of late. It was the "Son" that did it, the suggestion of an ongoing concern.

"Dear Sirs:" the letter read. "My grandfather, Mr. Nelson Wood, purchased from your company in 1953 a display case for his model of the *U.S.S. Constitution*. He lived at that time in Port Townsend, Washington, as your records might indicate. He died in 1976 and since then the case and ship-model, both of great beauty, and of great value to me, have been mine. Recently, in the course of moving here to Marysville, California, the glass front of the case, with the lovely etched harbor-scene border, was smashed. I have not been able to find anyone in Marysville to replace it. Can you?" It was signed, "Hopefully, Helen Wood."

I found myself smiling. I liked the directness and simplicity of the letter, its tribute to old Frank's work—through which he lived on. A new thought to me, that: you live on through the works you leave behind. Artists, craftsmen, composers, architects live on. Cops—? The smile faded. But Frank lived on in another way, too—the way a dead pirate did through his buried treasure.

Attached to the back of the shop in a galvanized sheet-metal lean-to was Frank's glass-etching equipment. The summer I was twelve he'd allowed me to watch him there once or twice. The etcher was a sandblasting rig, using compressed air, the compressor—its pocketa, pocketa I remembered—in the yard outside. I hadn't been in the shed since that summer, but found it now unchanged—a twelve-year-old boy's mind a good etching surface, too. Old canvas covered the rig, nations of spiders resident there. I was uncomfortable in the cramped, buggy space and left quickly. Poor Miss Wood. I would write and suggest she try Sacramento. I went back inside the house to look at Frank's notebook . . .

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The first eight pages were a jumble of sketches, designs, random dates (the earliest 3/25/39), snippets of poetry, notes, cryptic numbers, names, addresses, and doodles. I scanned through it all quickly, planning to come back over it. Page nine was a cluster of small penciled self-portraits, his round, fey eyes staring out at me a dozen times precisely as I remembered. I was momentarily startled. I'd had no inkling that this, among known others, was a talent he put his hands to.

But on page ten he got down to business. Across the top he had written, calligraphically, *"Sing what is well made*—so saith the poet Yeats." Below that, carefully columniated and running on for fifteen pages, was a list of his customers, the last one numbered 73. The name, the address, a brief description of the item, the price charged, and the date shipped were entered after each number—all in the classy penmanship they taught in his youth. With growing interest, I scanned through the sheets for Nelson Wood and found him—Number 20. The case he'd bought for his boat model was thirty-seven inches wide, thirty high, and twelve deep, made of alder wood and walnut, stained. Weight thirty-six pounds. Price $83.78, including shipping charges and sales tax—which I would bet the old crook never turned in. Shipped October 14, 1953. The number was circled, thus: (20) Numbers 19 and 21 weren't. Checking through the pages, I found that every fifth number, starting with 5, was circled—all the way through 100. Number 73 had been shipped May 12, 1983. Frank had died a week later, but had projected twenty-seven future jobs, six of them circled.

I made another drink, cooling it with skeletal ice cubes. Frank had wanted me to have the notebook *when and if I moved here.* So saith the poet Elmo. But why? There was damn little of philosophical or artistic merit in it, despite the self-portraits. On page four he had written: "To insure peace of mind, ignore the laws of man, obey the laws of nature," but that was merely a cynical personal code. There were other similar aphorisms scattered throughout the first eight pages. And circles. I noted his doodles tended toward the circular. On page six he had written, within a circle: "Pie r^2." Pi r^2 is the formula for determining the area of a circle, but he had written "Pie," not Pi. Meaning what? Pie in the sky?—the circle being an Indian symbol for heaven, if I remembered correctly.

These ruminations excited me, and prompted a plan—a distant hope. I got out an old sheet of Frank's business stationery to write a letter: "Dear Miss Wood, In answer to yours of the 18th, if you

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will have the case delivered to our shop, we will etch and replace the broken glass free of charge. Yours sincerely, Patrick McCreery."

Note the "our" and the "we." McCreery & Son (grand) was a going concern again—at least for one more job. Intently, I studied again the circled numbers in Frank's ledger. He had drawn them with the care of a draftsman. *They* were the work of art.

Then I drove downtown and posted the letter in time for the day's last pickup.

At five-thirty that afternoon, my door still open to air the place out, Elmo walked in. I was seated on the couch, notebook and Miss Wood's letter spread on the coffee table before me. I was feeling pretty good, I'd made progress. All the searching I'd done before had been a waste of time. The secret was in the notebook. I smiled at Elmo, who seemed sober again and had a bunch of asparagus in his hand.

"Peace offering, Elmo?"

"If you take it that way. You got one of those steamer gadgets for vegetables?"

"No."

"Well, then, just boil the goddamn things—a coffee pot's good—but not for too long. Last cutting of the year, Patrick."

"Thank you. Make yourself a drink if you want. The cubes are just about solid, bottle's on the counter."

He made a light highball, half full of ice, and put the asparagus in the sink. Then he sat in the chair facing me. Two visits in one day. In the previous two years he hadn't dropped in once. It meant something. Today, everything meant something.

"Interesting letter, Patrick?" He pointed with his glass. He seemed cold sober.

"Very, Elmo. One of Frank's old customers. Number 20. One of the circled ones."

"Oh?" His eyes widened with what seemed like genuine surprise.

"Frank had a thing for circles," I said. "All kinds of 'em in this ledger of his. For instance, there's one on page 7 surrounding the number 1063, with a degree symbol and the letters MP following that. Got any idea what it means?"

"Nope."

"I do. It's the melting point of something, some metal. MP. You were a blacksmith, weren't you, Elmo?"

"When I was anything. Ending ten years ago."

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"One of the summers I was up here, I remember you shoeing a horse. Frank took me over to watch."

"Kids used to watch me all the time. Norman Rockwell stuff."

"Skinniest blacksmith in all the world, I bet. But you had this furnace, didn't you?"

"All blacksmiths do, Patrick."

"I mean you could really crank up some heat. Like all the way up to 1063 degrees."

He shrugged.

"Which is the MP of gold—right? The melting point?"

"If you say so."

I sighed with growing tension. "So you were in on it with him."

"In on what?"

"C'mon, Elmo." I leaned forward. "Look, I know almost to the nickel what he swiped, what it would be worth today. When I was a cop—maybe the reason I *became* a cop—"

"I thought so."

"—I studied his file like it was holy writ. I interviewed—on my own time—every one of his victims who was still alive. I know just what he took from them, no matter what's been said. I've got a complete inventory. He took anything of gold—coins preferably—good stones, and cash. Nothing else. And none of it was ever found—a quarter million bucks' worth at today's prices. At least. Not counting the cash, even. So where is it all?"

"Gold is where you find it."

"Yeah. He wrote that in here somewhere, too, along with this little gem"—I flipped through the book, found it on page 7. " 'Bread cast upon the waters comes back buttered rolls.' " I looked up. "What's that mean, Elmo? Is that another clue?"

"Circled in on it, huh?"

I grinned. "I don't know. Time will tell. But a picture forms in my mind, getting clearer all the time. 'Circled in' is right."

He got up and came around to my side of the table. He read Miss Wood's letter and then found item 20 in the ledger. He straightened, shaking his head. "Who'da thought it," he said. "Got yourself a break there, didn't you, Patrick?" He finished his drink and put the glass on the table. "But that's only one of twenty, my boy."

"No," I corrected, "one of fourteen. The last six were never delivered, right? Numbers seventy-five through a hundred. Okay, let's assume a quarter-million value in all. Divide that by twenty and

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you get twelve thousand five hundred. Multiply that by six and you get seventy-five thousand. A tidy sum, Elmo, all I'll ever need."

"Need? You don't begin to know what you need, Patrick."

"And it's still around here, isn't it?"

"If you say so."

"I say so, and I'll find it now I've got the time. When Miss Wood's case arrives, I'll know for sure. I told her to send it and I'd fix it for free."

"You're a generous man, I'm sure." He was at the door, leaving. "Don't overcook the asparagus," he said. "It ruins it."

Helen Wood arrived Sunday afternoon. She was driving an old Dodge van, a twenty-foot camper hitched to the rear. On the driver's-side door of the van was inscribed: "Helen Wood's Cafe. Good Food. Port Townsend, Wash." I saw this through the front window. I had written her the previous Thursday.

Unshaven, unkempt, and unready, I stepped outside and stared at her blankly. I'd expected her case to arrive by commercial freight some days later. I'd never expected to set eyes on her in the flesh.

She said, "Mr. McCreery?" and I nodded.

"I'm Helen Wood. The case I wrote you about is in the camper." Her eyes scanned the general disarray of house and land and she added doubtfully, "Did you really mean you'd fix it for free? I tried to phone before coming, but—"

I spoke. "I have no phone. And yes, free is what I meant. But I didn't expect it—or you—to arrive so soon. I'm not at all ready to—"

"I can wait, Mr. McCreery. This outfit is what they call self-contained. Are you the son?"

"The grandson."

Her face brightened. "How nice! Third generation! And what a lovely town you have here." She got out of the van nimbly, revealing a strong, stocky body clad in a worn shirt and jeans. She was about five-foot-six and exuded energy and determination. She unlocked the door of the camper and swung it wide. The case was on the floor, shapeless in a swathing of blankets.

She pulled the bundle forward and picked it up with a grunt. Ropes were tied around it two ways. I took it from her and felt at once the extra heft of the thing, the weight of its hidden heart. I'd learned what they'd done and how they'd done it, Frank and Elmo. My lingering embarrassment vanished. I walked into the house and put the case down on the coffee table, she following close behind.

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"It's so *cool* here," she said, her dark eyes darting around. "In Marysville, it's been over a hundred three days in a row. This isn't the shop, is it?"

"No." I gestured. "It's behind that door. Not open on Sundays."

"May I see it?"

"It's a mess, Miss Wood."

"Is that where you do the glass work?"

"No. I do that in a shed out back—also a mess, also closed. But since you're here, I'll start on this tomorrow. There's a camper park down on Ridge Road in town. You can stay there."

"It's full," she told me. "I noticed their sign as I passed. If it wouldn't be inconvenient, could I park in among your trees?"

"If it's a matter of money, Miss Wood, I'll be glad to—"

"No—please, it's not that. It's—" But of course it was. She exuded tough times, hard-fought.

"What if," I said unkindly, "I'd told you it would cost fifty bucks to replace the glass?"

"Then I would have had to wait a while," she said, chin up. "I've had a series of unexpected setbacks. But, of course if you'd find my presence—"

"You may stay," I said, not really caring, wanting only to get her out of the place.

"Or if your wife—"

"I have no wife. As you say, just pull in among the trees. There's a hose bib out back, and a hose. At least you can have water. Just hook yourself up."

"Thank you," she said, and left, chin still high.

In about two minutes, I had the case in the workshop, unwrapped on the carpet-covered bench where Frank cut his glass. I was in a fever of excitement. After all the tedious years of waiting, searching, and dreaming, here it was. The case—as I would note later—was a beauty. The heavy, alder bottom section, in three tiers, with ornately routed edgings, stood a half inch off the bench on four burnished brass balls, as feet. Very carefully, I laid the case on its back, exposing the $3 \times 4''$ brass plate Frank had affixed to the bottom of the job. Two summers ago I'd found a dozen such plates in a drawer, awaiting future work, the company name and address already inscribed. On this one was also inscribed Nelson Wood's name, the date the job was finished, and the number—the magical 20. It was secured to the wood by round-headed brass screws at each corner. A touch of class.

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I sighed heavily—hands, face, and neck damp with sweat. Behind that plate, I was certain now, was a small ingot of gold, probably implanted with jewels and worth at least twelve thousand five hundred dollars. It had to be. Every clue in the notebook confirmed it, every corny aphorism. On Friday I had found on page five a sketch that could only be a design for a mold $2\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{3}{4}$" in which to pour the gold made molten across the street in Elmo's forge. The ingot would fit neatly under the plate. I picked up a screwdriver, braced one shaking hand against the other, and began to work.

"So she brought it here in person," Elmo said behind me. "And you weren't ready for it, were you—or her, either?"

I'd heard him come in and didn't turn. One screw was halfway out of the wood.

"Tsk, tsk," he said. "This isn't the workshop of a going concern. You should at least have tidied it up. Frank left it neat as a pin."

"And probably kept his doors closed," I growled.

"Ah, but you have no secrets from me, Patrick, and I, apparently, none from you. So you think you found it—"

I turned. "Did I?" I was no longer so sure. He looked too calm. "Is it under there, or isn't it, Elmo? And if it is, why?"

"Continue with your work."

"Why would he send a fortune to a stranger? What would be the point—aside from the fact that he didn't want me to have it?"

"Perhaps that was point enough. Or perhaps he had no point at all. Perhaps he was merely playing God—who knows?"

"You do."

"No, I've yet to understand my first Irishman, even him. But get on with it, Patrick, and I'll go assist your guest."

I tapped the plate with the butt of the screwdriver—a dull wooden thud. I put the tool down, went in the house, and made my first drink of the day.

A half hour later, Elmo said, "Well, yes, Patrick, I do believe I'll have one myself."

"From now on," I snarled, "that door gets locked and stays locked. Make your own."

Seated across from me, drink in hand, he said, "It's not as hard as you think, this etching of glass. Everything you need is in the shop, waiting for you, including Miss Wood's particular design. He did it a number of times for ship-model builders."

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"Phooey!"

"I used to help him occasionally. I can help you."

"Phooey!"

"Don't 'phooey' me, Patrick. That woman has come a long way, carrying a delicate hope. It must be respected. What she sees in that case is beauty wrought with loving care. What you see, or think you see, is a dangerous bonanza of unearned and undeserved wealth."

"Then where is it, Elmo? It's buried around here, isn't it? *All* of it, I mean."

"It doesn't exist, Patrick. I told you that."

"*Phooey!* The notebook or ledger or whatever the hell it is, practically advertises it!"

Elmo grinned and sipped from his pale, ice-filled glass. "Some cop you are, Patrick. Or were. Look at that ledger."

"I have, for God's sake!"

"Yes, you've looked, but you haven't seen. Study the circles around those twenty numbers."

"What about them?"

"They were all made at the same time with the same pen—unlike the entries themselves. Not the 'Pie' item, and the melting point numbers, and all the other clues. All made at the same time with the same pen, a month before he died. It was like salting a mine, and I told him it wouldn't work, it was too obvious, but he said it would and he was right. It was in your mind like a cancer—his very words. He had friends on that police force of yours, Patrick, as well as enemies. Friends associated with him in other enterprises, years ago. They told him what you were up to down there. Hell, he knew you better than he knew your father."

"What friends? I don't believe this."

"A man named O'Connell, for one. John, as I remember. And—significantly, Patrick—a man named Parnell. And of equal significance, although I'm just as sure unnoted by you, everyone he stole from was two things—greedily rich and Irish."

"You don't steal from the poor, Elmo, it doesn't pay. So he spent it, didn't he?"

"No."

"Well, he damn sure didn't make a living from seventy-three eighty-five-dollar jobs in thirty-five years, or however long it was. *That* I'm cop enough to know."

"And you're right. Those were all special orders. He made his living from small cases of several standard sizes he wholesaled to

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W & J Sloane, and others, in San Francisco. He made them by the dozen on a production-line basis. People bought them for what are called 'collectibles.' Dolls, statuettes, knickknacks, anything they wanted to protect."

I sighed, weary and mad. "So it was nothing but a goddamn trap."

"Or a chance to take a good hard look at yourself—which was the point to the whole exercise, a point you've entirely missed."

"I don't need to be taught a lesson."

He too sighed, an old man, suddenly looking his years. "Your grandfather," he said, "was burdened by a secret and a curse."

"Sure. You'd have it that all Irishmen are. Listen, I asked you this before, but you didn't answer. Is that woman out there—Miss Wood, if that's her name—part of the bloody plot? Did you hire her, for God's sake, to write that letter and show up today?"

I was glaring at him and he was silent for a time. "No," he said finally. "Her letter and her arrival in person today puzzle me. Your grandfather was a mystic, a Theosophist—in fact, your basic Irishman. He believed in the occult, in the intervention of good and evil forces into the affairs of men. Which I don't. But maybe design, rather than pure chance, intrudes into certain lives. Maybe she—"

"That's garbage and you know it. So what did you and mystical old Gramps expect me to do—assuming she wouldn't show up with one of the magic numbers?"

"*He* expected you to search this place until you were satisfied it wasn't here, and then, following the clues, go to them, his customers, not vice versa. You'll note that some of the circled numbers are within a few hours' journey of here. He expected you—"

I stopped listening. A letter I'd been composing was to have been addressed to precisely those people. Dear Sir: Our records indicate that the case you purchased from McCreery & Son has been in service X number of years. I personally will be pleased to call on you, free of charge, to inspect and refurbish, etc. etc. I'd been led down the garden path to where they dump the trash.

I got up and made another drink, dark with scotch. I took it back and stood in front of Elmo's chair. "And after I'd suffered that disappointment," I said savagely, "what then?"

"We expected you—he did, anyway—to take up the business."

"A purged and humbled man. Me, instead of felonious old Dad."

"Patrick, you were too young to know at the time, but he didn't install that sign until after your two summers here. In fact, until after your father died."

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"You mean I was supposed to be the 'Son' all along?"

"Not literally. But you showed noticeable interest in the work during those two summers."

"I showed noticeable interest in fishing—that's all *I* remember."

Just then, in that cursed open door, Helen Wood appeared. She said, tentative and shy in the sudden silence that fell, "Am I too early?"

"For what?" I snapped.

"Ah, Patrick," Elmo said, "Miss Wood, it develops, is a professional cook." He rose courteously to his feet. "In Port Townsend, she ran a restaurant for fifteen years, until certain negative events occurred. I have steak and asparagus in my freezer across the street. I suggested that tonight she might like to conjoin her art to our victuals."

She had changed into slacks and a blouse, her party stuff. She had taken some pains with her hair and makeup. She looked like the salt of the earth. Beaten on all fronts, I glared at Elmo and shrugged, not at all hungry. "Well, why not?"

I wasn't drunk, and neither was he. He had brought from across the street, along with the "victuals," a three-liter jug of wine. Miss Wood had just gone back to her camper after insisting on doing the dishes. I wasn't drunk, but I hoped to be later.

"You drew her out," I said, "like Svengali drew out Trilby."

"She needed drawing out, Patrick. A succession of hard knocks represses the tongue."

"With the cunning and welcome persistence of a nosey old man, you picked her clean as a bone in the desert. Why?"

"Sum her up," he said bluntly.

"All right. In three words—a nice girl."

"Girl? Woman, I would say. Forty, if a day. Seasoned, matured."

"Like old cheese. Jesus, you're so obvious." The steak or something, perhaps my own succession of hard knocks, sat heavily on my stomach. I lightened it with a half glass of wine. "You said before she came that my sainted grandpere was burdened with a secret and a curse. What were they?"

"You as a cop," he responded snidely, "should've figured it out by now."

"The next time you need a cop," I said, reflexively quoting the established rejoinder, "call a hippie or your neighborhood mugger. What was the secret? What was the curse?"

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He settled deeper within the cushions at his back and remained silent.

"Or putting it another way, damnit, where's the money?"

"God knows," he said. "And God knows to what bloody ends it was put."

"You mean it's not buried out among the trees?"

"No. It's buried in graves, Patrick. In the graves of fools called martyrs."

"Oh? What does that mean?"

He sighed and said, "Do you know the poet Yeats? William Butler Yeats?"

" 'Sing what is well made,' " I quoted from recent, sharp memory.

"Among other notable lines. Your grandfather knew and loved his works. The Irish have an addiction to the voice that sings most sweetly, God love them."

"And?"

"Yeats was a Nationalist. He magnetized funds for the cause, freedom of all Ireland from the yoke of British rule—Ulster included, where the dead still mount upon the dead." Elmo drank his wine as though in mourning.

"He gave it to the IRA?"

"Every nickel. Easily transportable. No problems, as with stocks, bonds, and other traceable items. Gold coins. Jewels. Cash. The Irish of the Old World have siphoned millions from the Irish of the New. To buy weapons—and headstones—for their dead."

"Jesus," I muttered.

"Not party to it, one would think. And later, neither was Frank. He learned finally where the values are. Try it, Patrick." He emptied his glass and set it down. "Spent many a night in this chair," he said, "with Frank right where you are. I'd go to sleep while he went on talking. Great talker, Frank—"

"Be my guest," I said indifferently and got up.

Elmo's eyes opened. "By the way, Patrick, that forge of mine couldn't crank up half the temperature necessary to melt gold. You should have known that, my boy. Make a better almost anything than a cop."

Anger, frustration, disappointment—a compote of bitter fruit. Plus a new fear of the future, before now so full of promise. I couldn't sleep. I went into the workshop and stared around morosely. Then I set Helen Wood's case back up on its feet and saw for the first time

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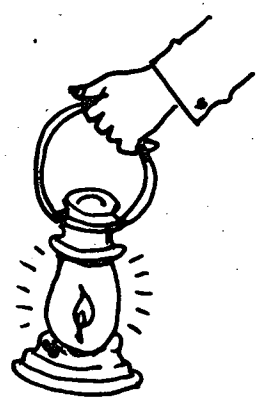
the sheer beauty of the thing—what you can do with wood if you want, and have the hands.

The place was a mess. It hadn't been cleaned since Frank died—and I, in searching through it for the wealth that wasn't there, had turned mess into shambles.

It was one o'clock in the morning, but I began to put it together again and to clean it up. Tomorrow, maybe—a Monday, the start of a new week—with Elmo's help, if still offered, I'd test these cop's hands and see how wanting they were.

Meanwhile, Miss Wood would have to wait, and—if she wanted—to cook. Pray God, I thought, picking up the broom, she wasn't Irish. Or perhaps, pray God, she was.



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a *NEW* short story by

SHARYN McCRUMB

"Is it true you're going to marry Kenny Budrell?" Lillian called out.

"You're here for the wedding, honey," Varnee purred. "Have you got something I could borrow? I already have something old, and new, and blue."

Avon Books is bringing out Sharyn McCrumb's third mystery novel this spring. She is president of the Appalachian Association and used to be a newspaper reporter, so (she wrote us) she can vouch for most of the sentiments in this story . . .

NOT ALL BRIDES ARE BEAUTIFUL

by *SHARYN McCRUMB*

They say that all brides are supposed to be beautiful, but I didn't like the look of this one. She came into the prison reception area wearing a lavender suit and a little black hat with a veil. Her figure was okay, but when she went up to Tracer and that other photographer from the wire service, there was a hard look about her, despite that spun-sugar smile. I knew it would be easy to get an interview—she'd *insist* on it—but that didn't mean I was going to enjoy talking to her.

"Is it true you're going to marry Kenny Budrell?" I called out.

She redirected her smile at me, and her dark eyes lit up like miner's lamps.

"You're here for the wedding, honey?" she purred. "Have you got something I could borrow? I already have something old, and new, and blue."

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Just a regular old folksy wedding. I was about to tell her what I'd like to lend her when I felt a nudge in my side. Tracer—reminding me that good reporters get stories any way they can. I managed a faint smile. "Sure, I'll see what I can find. Why don't we go into the ladies room and get acquainted?"

She smiled back. "This is my day to get acquainted."

"That's right," said Tracer. "You've never met the groom, have you?"

Kenny Budrell had been a newsroom byword since before I joined the paper. By the time he was eighteen, his clip-file in the newspaper morgue was an inch thick: car theft, assault and battery, attempted murder. He did some time in the state penitentiary about the same time I was at the university, and it seems we both graduated with honors. The next news of Kenny was that he'd robbed a local convenience store and taken the female clerk hostage. Tracer was the photographer on assignment when they found her body; he says it's one of the few times he's been sick on duty. It took three more robberies, each followed by the brutal murder of a hostage, before the police finally caught up with Kenny. He didn't make it through the roadblock and took a bullet in the shoulder trying to shoot his way past.

The trial took a couple of weeks. The paper sent Rudy Carr, a much more seasoned reporter than I, to cover it, but I followed the coverage and listened to the office gossip. The defense had rounded up a psychologist who said Kenny must have been temporarily insane, and he never did confess to the killings, but the jury had been looking at that cold, dead face of Kenny's for two weeks and they didn't buy it. They found him guilty in record time, and the judge obliged with a death sentence.

After that, the only clippings added to Kenny's file were routine one-column stories about his appeal to the State Supreme Court, and then to Washington. That route having failed, it was official: in six weeks Kenny Budrell would go to the electric chair.

That's when *she* turned up.

Varnee Sumner—sometime journalist and activist, fulltime opportunist. In between her ecological-feminist poetry readings and her grant proposals, Varnee had found time to strike up a correspondence with Kenny. The first we heard of it was when the warden sent out a press release saying that Kenny Budrell had been granted permission to get married two weeks before his execution.

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It shouldn't have come as a surprise to me that Varnee Sumner wanted to be pals—that's probably what my city editor was counting on when he assigned me to cover the story.

"What's your name?" she asked me as she applied a fuchsia shade of lipstick to her small, tight mouth.

"Lillian Robillard. Tell me—are you nervous?" I decided against taking notes. That might make her more careful about what she said.

She smoothed her hair. "Nervous? Why should I be nervous? It's true I've never met Kenny, but we've become real close through our letters—I've come to know his soul."

I winced. Kenny Budrell's soul should come with a Surgeon General's warning. Maybe *she* wasn't nervous about marrying a mass murderer, but I would have been.

My thoughts must have been obvious, because she said, "Besides, they're not going to let him come near me, you know. Even during the wedding ceremony he'll be on one side of a wire screen and we'll be on the other."

"Will they let you spend time alone with him?"

That question did faze her. "Lord, I hope—" I'd swear she was going to say *not*, but she caught herself and said, "Perhaps we'll have a quiet talk through the screen. —Honey, would you like to be my maid of honor?"

"I'd love to," I said. "And would you like to give me an exclusive pre-wedding interview?"

"I wish I could," she said, "but I've promised the story to *Personal World* for ten thousand dollars." She straightened her skirt and edged past me and out the door.

I didn't think it was possible, but I was beginning to feel sorry for Kenny Budrell.

"You looked real good out there as maid of honor," Tracer told me as we left the prison. "I got a good shot of you and the warden congratulating the bride."

"Well, if I looked happy for them pictures *do* lie." The television crews had arrived just as we were leaving and Varnee was granting interviews right and left, talking about Kenny's beautiful soul and how she was going to write to the President about his case. "You know why she's doing this, don't you?"

Tracer gave me a sad smile. "Well, I ruled out love early on."

"It's a con game. She stays married to him for two weeks, after

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which the State conveniently executes him, and she's a widow who stands to make a fortune on movie rights and book contracts. *I Was a Killer's Bride!*"

"Maybe they deserve each other," said Tracer mildly. "Kenny Budrell is no choir boy."

I pulled open the outside door fiercely. "He grew up poor and tough, and for all I know he *may* not be in his right mind. But there's nothing circumstantial about what she's doing!"

Tracer grinned at me. "I can see you're going to have a tough time trying to write up this wedding announcement."

He was right. It took me two hours to get the acid out of my copy. But I managed. I wanted to stay assigned to the story.

I didn't see the new Mrs. Budrell for the next two weeks, but I kept track of her. She went to Washington and gave a couple of speeches about the injustices of the American penal system. She tried to get in to see the Vice-President and a couple of Supreme Court justices, but that didn't pan out. She managed to get plenty of newspaper space, though, and even made the cover of a supermarket newspaper. They ran a picture of her with the caption: Courageous Bride Fights for Husband's Life.

Because of the tearjerker angle, her efforts on Kenny's behalf received far more publicity than those of the court-appointed attorney assigned to his case. Allen Linden, a quiet, plodding type just out of law school, had been filing stacks of appeals and doing everything he could do, but nobody paid any attention. He wasn't newsworthy, and he shied away from the media blitz. He hadn't attended Budrell's wedding and he declined all interviews to discuss the newlyweds. I know, because I tried to talk with him three times—the last time he'd brushed past me in the hall outside his office, murmuring, "I'm doing the best I can for him, which is more than I can say for—"

He swallowed the rest but I knew what he had been about to say. Varnee wasn't doing a thing to really help her husband's case, although she'd been on two national talk shows and a campus lecture tour, and there was talk of a major book contract. Varnee was doing just fine—for herself.

The whole sideshow was due to end on April third, the date of Kenny's execution. The editor was sending Rudy Carr to cover that and I was going along to do a sidebar on the widow-to-be. I wondered

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how she was going to play her part—grieving bride or impassioned activist?

"I'm glad to see it's raining," said Tracer, hunched down in the back seat with his camera equipment. "That ought to keep the demonstrators away."

Rudy, at the wheel, glanced at him in the rearview mirror and scowled. He had hardly spoken since we started.

I watched the windshield wipers slapping the rain. "It won't keep *her* away," I said, feeling the chill, glad I'd worn my sheepskin coat.

"You've got to give the woman credit, though," Tracer said. "She's been using this case to say a lot of things that need saying about capital punishment."

I sighed. If you gave Tracer a sack of manure, he'd spend two hours looking for the pony.

"She's getting rich off this," I pointed out. "Did you know that Kenny Budrell has a mother and sisters?"

"And so did two of the victims," added Rudy with such quiet intensity that it shut both Tracer and me up for the rest of the trip.

The prison reception room was far more crowded for the execution than it had been for the wedding. By now Varnee had received so much publicity she was a national news item, and when we arrived she was three-deep in reporters. She was wearing a black designer suit and the same hat she'd worn for the wedding. I knew she wouldn't give me the time of day with all the bigger fish waving microphones and cameras in her face, but I did get a photocopy of her speech on capital punishment from a stack of copies she'd brought with her.

"You'd better talk to her now," Tracer said. "In a few minutes they're taking the witnesses in to view the execution and you're not cleared for that."

I stared at him. "You mean she's going to watch?"

"Oh, yeah. They agreed on that from the start."

I might have gone over and talked with her then, but I noticed Allen Linden, Kenny's attorney, sitting on a bench by himself, sipping coffee. He looked tired, and his grey suit might have been slept in for all its wrinkles.

He looked up warily as I approached.

"You don't have to talk to me if you don't want," I said.

He managed a wan smile. "Have I seen you somewhere before?"

I introduced myself. "You've dodged me in the hall outside your

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office a few times," I admitted. "But I didn't come over here to give you a hard time. Honest."

He let out a long sigh. "This is my first capital murder case," he said in a weary voice. "It's hard to know what to do."

"I'm sure you did your best." He was very young and I wasn't sure how good his best was, but he seemed badly in need of solace.

"Kenny Budrell isn't a very nice person," he mused.

I was puzzled. I thought lawyers always spoke up for their clients. "You don't think he's innocent?"

"He never claimed to be," said Linden. "At one point he expressed surprise at all the fuss being made over a couple of broads, as he put it. No, he's not a very nice person. But he was entitled to the best defense he could get. To every effort I could make."

I guess it's inevitable for a lawyer to feel guilty if his client is about to die. He must wonder if there is something else he could have done. "I'm sure you did everything you could," I said. "And if Varnee couldn't get him a stay of execution, it must have been hopeless."

He grimaced at the sound of her name. "She's not a very nice person, either, is she?"

I hesitated. "How does Kenny Budrell feel about her?"

"Very flattered," smiled Linden. "Here is a minor celebrity making his case a prime-time issue. He has a huge scrapbook of her—he keeps her letters under his pillow. He said to me once: 'She loves me, so I must be a hero. I've worried a lot about that.' "

There was a stir in the crowd and the warden, flanked by two guards, came into the room. I stiffened, dreading the next deliberate hour.

"It will be over soon," I whispered.

"I know. I hope I've done the right thing."

"Are you going to watch the execution?"

Linden shut his eyes. "There isn't going to be one. I found an irregularity in the police procedure and got the case overturned. I've just made Kenny Budrell a free man."

"But he's guilty!" I protested.

"But he's still entitled to due process, same as anyone else, and it's my job to take advantage of anything that will benefit my client." He shook his head. "I can't even take credit for it. It just fell into my lap."

"What happened?"

"Remember when they captured Kenny at the roadblock?"

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"Yes. He was wounded in the shootout."

"Right. Well, in all the excitement nobody remembered to read him his rights. Later in the hospital, when he was questioned, the police assumed it had already been done. One of the state troopers got to thinking about the case and came forward to tell me he thought there had been a slip-up. I checked, and he was right: Kenny wasn't mirandized, so the law says there's no case. The trooper told me he came forward because of all this business with Varnee. He said maybe the guy deserved a break, after all."

Tracer got a first-class series of pictures of the warden telling Varnee that her new husband was now a free man until death do them part, and of Varnee eventually starting to scream right there in front of the TV cameras. As far as I'm concerned, they deserve a Pulitzer.

DETECTIVERSE

VARIETY IS THE PRICE OF LIFE

by DELIA SCOTT

Marcus Perry killed his wife—
Thought he'd have a better life.
Everything was fine and dandy
Till his modus operandi
Showed he'd done it once before.
Now the cops are at his door.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

It made no sense, Maurice Kenyon told the Inspector. Eldon Brace had been robbed, stripped, clubbed to death, and dumped on the headland near Rottingdean. "And the paper says there have been three of these murders in the last month. What's going on?"

"I assure you the police have matters in hand," Stainsforth said. "The investigation is proceeding, but you do appreciate it would be counter-productive for me to discuss the case with you here and now. Unless you know something we need to know . . ."

THE GOOD OLD DAYS BY THE SEA

by WILLIAM BANKIER

So this was where it had happened. Maurice Kenyon allowed bitter sensations to flood over him. This was where Bracey had been beaten to death and dumped naked on a headland overlooking his precious English Channel. This was Brighton, the setting for one of Graham Greene's fine thrillers, summer home of Royalty at the turn of the century, and, today, the residence of a multiple killer who had taken one too many.

Not that Kenyon possessed knowledge not available to the police. What he had was determination and an anxious feeling—close to a warning—that he had not come down here from London for nothing.

The train from Victoria had rolled in on time and let Kenyon out under a lofty roof of glass resting on ornate iron pillars. People moved in orderly fashion toward predictable destinations. These

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were English people. Kenyon wandered outside, saw a sloping street, and followed it down toward the sea.

All he really wanted was to leave this country on an airplane heading back to Montreal with Gloria by his side. She was Bracey's girl, the sort who would take her holidays to fly three thousand miles to London with a man she was determined to love, willing to tolerate a week of barbershop quartets flattering each other with songs that all sounded the same because there would also be a certain amount of love. Then the convention ended and Bracey climbed onto a train for his unscheduled journey to Brighton. "Back in a few days," he had told his friends and they were not pleased.

"Can you direct me to the police station?" Kenyon addressed a constable wearing an Edwardian beard on his prep-school face. His helmet visor framed deadly Anglo eyes. "The one where Detective-Inspector Stainsforth is based," Kenyon added.

The officer's name gave this unimpressive colonial in his cheap summer suit a right to know. "Two streets straight ahead, sir, then bear left and you can't miss it. Sir."

Kenyon turned past a pub called The Admiral's Hook, pausing to stare a quarter of a mile down the hill to the grey-green sea shuffling against what looked like a shingle beach and extending to a draftsman's horizon ruled in an uninterrupted line. He walked on to the police station, went inside, and repeated the name of Stainsforth to a sergeant behind a desk.

"Nature of your business, sir?"

"The Eldon Brace murder. Canadian. Found dead four days ago not far from here."

"Take a seat, sir. Won't be a tick." The sergeant turned to a telephone, dialed a number, and said something Kenyon missed because his mind was thundering intermittently these days with frustration. All these past years, he had been right. Stick-in-the-mud, stay-at-home Maurice Kenyon had been right to keep his nose close to the drawing board, hacking his work, collecting his fees, attending Barbershop Quartet Society functions locally or within driving distance of Montreal, and adventurous, kick-over-the-traces, let's-have-a-ball Bracey had been wrong. The flight to England had turned out to be a one-way trip to a corner of a foreign field. What a waste.

"Inspector will see you now, sir."

Kenyon entered a small office and seated himself opposite a cricket of a man who looked anxious, as if the visitor's arrival was more than he could handle. That impression was deceptive. In the next

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ten minutes, with the utmost courtesy, Stainsforth presented Kenyon with a massive portion of The Great British Cold Shoulder. It seemed the Establishment knew what it was doing—and Kenyon did not need to know. When something arose that he *might* need to know, they would be in touch. Until then, Goodbye, Dolly, I Must Leave You. The old song bellowed in Kenyon's mind with the tenor going mad on top.

"But it makes no sense to me, Inspector. He was robbed and stripped and clubbed to death and dumped on the headland near that crazy town—"

"Rottingdean. There's a lovely dining room there, overlooking the sea. You can catch a bus just down the road."

"And the paper says there have been three of these murders in the last month. What's going on?"

"I assure you the police have matters in hand. The investigation is proceeding, but you do appreciate it would be counter-productive for me to discuss the case with you here and now." The shy eyes reached for Maurice hesitantly. "Unless you know something we need to know?"

"Nothing. He was a friend of mine. I only want to know what happened."

In London, in her room in the hotel in Bayswater, Gloria Lannerman had advised against Kenyon's visit to Brighton. "What can you do?" she asked him that morning, finishing her room-service breakfast as he took his leave. A practical woman, she had not seen the sense of their spending money on two rooms now that Brace was gone. Therefore, Kenyon had checked out of his single and doubled up. They were old friends, after all, and with the shock of Bracey's murder, they needed companionship. So they were now sleeping together in the big bed like brother and sister. Well, not exactly—there was comfort in kissing.

Kenyon thought of Gloria now as he stood again at the intersection on the hillside, with the main road running down to the waterfront and, facing him beyond traffic, the open doorway of The Admiral's Hook. There were trains up to London almost every hour, so what was the rush? Besides, he could smell the hops from that open door. Kenyon could picture his old friend standing here a few days ago in the seaside town where he had worked back in the Sixties. What would Bracey do on a day like today? He would be inside, knocking back the draft Guinness. He would be imbibing the alcohol and

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priming himself for adventure. "Let it happen," Bracey would have been exhorting himself, never expecting the event was to include a session of batting practice on and around his head.

The traffic parted—almost as if things were beginning to happen for Kenyon's benefit—and he walked across the road into the dim and rancid atmosphere of the pub.

It was a pub in need of refurbishment. A few stained-glass panes remained in leaded windows now refitted with ordinary glass. The carpet was mottled from wear. Somebody had tried to tape together slashes in the velour upholstery. Ashtrays overflowed. Unwashed beer mugs clogged the bar.

Kenyon found a place to stand. A portly girl in denim asked him what he wanted and called him luv. In memory of Eldon Brace, Kenyon ordered a pint of Guinness. She brought him the jug of black with its creamy half inch on top and he paid her and took a swallow. It was like drinking cooled Irish coffee, without the coffee.

If Stainsforth was right, he told himself, and everything was under control at the police station, then Kenyon was a fool to hang around Brighton wasting time and money. He would be better off in Montreal, completing the illustrations for *Dudley the Dinosaur*, getting the work to his editor before deadline for a change. And Gloria was due home, too. They were trying to run the personnel department at Manoir Tobias without her.

"How are you enjoying England, then?" The man standing beside Kenyon at the bar was stocky in subdued working-class clothes.

"What's all this propaganda about bad weather?"

During a few minutes of small talk, the Canadian volunteered his name and identified himself as a freelance illustrator.

"I'm a merchant seaman," the young man said. His style was engaging, his appearance well short of handsome and the more reassuring for it. Perfectly round head capped with short, dry brown hair. Weathered skin. Pale-grey eyes, not large. No lips to speak of. Kenyon could imagine this compact youth serving in one of the old wooden sailing ships, packed in with sixty others at sea for three years. And returning, miraculously, as shipmates instead of having murdered half their number.

"My name is Bert Feeley." He put out a hand to be shaken, surprising Kenyon by forming the grip with thumbs interlocked and drawing him closer, as if they were about to arm-wrestle. "Let me buy you a drink."

Experiencing mixed feelings over the intimate handshake, still

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sensing the rough texture of the man's skin, Kenyon cast about for something to say. "I want to go and see the Royal Pavilion." Feeley, he decided, would fit in anywhere. He was able to connect with strangers, amend attitudes, become part of a larger society like a colony of ants. Or a pack of wolves.

At first, Kenyon saw himself as different—a pure individual. Then he realized it was not always so—music made him just like Feeley. The chorus would sing "Coney Island Baby" and he would submerge himself in harmony, controlling his voice so that it was no longer Kenyon's voice but a strand of the fabric that was the choir.

"I can tell you how to get to the Royal Pavilion," Feeley said. "Better still, after we've had our beer, I'll walk you over there. Don't want you losing yourself in the Lanes."

As sometimes happened, Kenyon found his customary reserve breaking down in Feeley's company. The beer was to blame. He would regret the emerging relationship when he sobered up, but now the other Kenyon was in control, buying a drink to repay the sailor's kindness, accepting yet another when his glass was empty. Conversation flowed easily, mostly from the Englishman's side. He talked of ships, ports, girls, fights, hangovers—all the basic stuff of pub camaraderie. Kenyon wasn't required to contribute much. He responded to a few questions, told about his work as an illustrator, lied about his income to satisfy his pride.

At some point, they took on board a shepherd's pie. Then, with Kenyon unable to believe the fuzzy numbers on his watch, it was three o'clock, closing time, and they were on the pavement outside the pub with a sea breeze wafting up from the channel.

"The Pavilion," Feeley said, taking Kenyon's arm and leading him into an alleyway. "You wanted to get to the Royal Pavilion."

"Why not?" Kenyon said, and for no good reason that response came across as very funny indeed. The men were still laughing as they moved into the maze of narrow streets lined with antique shops and boutiques known as the Lanes.

"Short cut through here," Feeley said. "See how you need me, Maurice?"

"Need you?" Kenyon said. "You're the whole bloody reason I came to Brighton." More laughter as they rolled on, shoulder to shoulder. Despite the booze, pint after pint of truth serum, Kenyon had avoided telling his companion the intimate secret of Eldon Brace. His friend's death was like a skeleton in the closet, not something to be paraded before a stranger.

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Parcels of time were tumbling out of Kenyon's afternoon. He could not have said whether they wandered for five minutes or an hour. They looked in windows, Feeley pointing out brass souvenirs, Kenyon remaining noncommittal. Then they were inside a shop and Feeley was exchanging conversation with the lady in charge. He seemed to be on good terms with her.

Outside again, the sailor displayed a framed painting he must have purchased during one of Kenyon's blackouts. "This is for you," he said, handing over the painting. Kenyon refused to put his hands out for it. The bulky shape of the gift bothered him as much as anything; it would leave him wandering around like a man moving house.

"I can't accept this, Bert."

"I bought it for you."

"You shouldn't have. We don't know each other."

"I thought we were friends."

Kenyon couldn't think of an answer to that. It began to rain, large drops falling like coins as they stood in the rapidly emptying street, the cheap oil-rendering of hills and trees and sky in its fake gilt frame holding the men together. The shower began to deliver on its promise to become a cloudburst. "We'd better get inside," Feeley said.

"Where?" Kenyon wanted no more shops.

"I live around the corner. Come on."

Feeley led his companion to a blue-metal door beside yet another pub. He pushed it open, exposing two grey-wooden doors, one of which he opened with a key from a jingling ring. Uncarpeted stairs led steeply upward. Kenyon followed on and found himself in a small bed-sitting room littered with tousled clothing and smelling of mildew. He was aware of many cardboard boxes, open-topped, loaded with household goods. Feeley flung open a window and beckoned his guest to his side.

"Look," he said. "The Royal Pavilion. You *can* get there from here."

Kenyon went to the window and looked out through curtains of rain at pale-green domes in the middle distance. He yawned. "I'm zonked, Bert. Too much beer in the middle of the day."

"Then lie down. Close your eyes for a while, you'll be okay." Feeley went to the bed, flung garments and papers to one side or the other, and turned over a dead pillow. "The rain will stop and we can head on out . . ."

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It was more than a nap. It became the sleep Kenyon had needed since hearing about Bracey's murder. As soon as he fell back onto the ripe bedding, he sank into a semiconscious state, as if the earthy pallet was a field of poppies. And he dreamed—or was it real?

A voice—Bert Feeley's voice?—said quietly, as if whispering down a telephone, "Sarah, will you accept my judgment? He didn't want the painting, but I got him here, anyway. It started to rain. No, not the gods on our side, only the rotten English summer. Anyway, he's hardly worth it. I've checked him over—a bit of cash, everything else plain stuff. Not like the others." The voice paused, then concluded, "We'll do one more, but for proper gain."

When Kenyon woke up, the room was dark. He sat up, surrounded by foreign shapes and smells. What had seemed interesting when he was drunk was now dangerous. He panicked, had to get out, flung himself the wrong way on the bed and collided with a wall, swung the other way, kicking boxes, hissing from shock and pain, moving ahead blindly with arms extended. He touched wallpaper, edged sideways, and felt slick wood. A door. A doorknob which he turned—and, thank God, the door opened and he stepped through.

But not into a corridor. He was blundering against fabrics, causing a cascade of familiar noise, a shammer of wire coat-hangers. He was in a closet! What if the door closed and he couldn't get it open?

His foot came down inside yet another box. He almost fell, catching hold of a garment, feeling rough cloth rimmed with leather. The sleeve of a jacket. Kenyon took a deep breath and, yes—but, no, impossible—he knew the damp, tweedy smell, instinct assured him he was right. He had caught hold of the sleeve of Eldon Brace's harris-tweed sportscoat.

There was a book of matches in his pocket. He lit one, and the flickering light was sufficient. It was Bracey's jacket right enough, the label inside identified a Montreal tailor. And here on the floor, gleaming in a litter of training shoes, were Eldon's shiny black oxfords. The rest of his things must be in here, too. Match after match, Kenyon got himself accustomed to the idea that his buddy had been in this room before he was murdered. Or after he was beaten to death on the headland along the coast, he was stripped and his things were brought back here.

A key rattled in the front-door lock and it swung open. Bert Feeley said, "What the hell, starting fires?" and switched on the overhead light.

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Kenyon came out of the closet with more aggression than he realized he possessed. "My friend Bracey," he said. "His clothes—"

The young sailor drew a cosh out of his pocket. It was covered in shiny brown leather and had a loop at one end. He slipped this over his wrist and began taking practice swings at the palm of his other hand. The thing was obviously weighted with lead, a skull-crusher. "Your *friend,*" he said with genuine astonishment. He was more interested than bothered. "Now there's a turn-up for the books. Sit down before you fall down. Or I knock you down."

Kenyon edged to the bed and lowered himself. "You murdered him. And the others I heard on the phone. Three of them."

"You could have been a lucky man. You aren't worth the taking. Your friend carried a lot of money, and he wore expensive jewelry we could sell." Feeley edged across the room, kicked shut the closet door. "Too bad you went in there. I was going to let you swim away, but now you know, we'll have to top you."

Long ago, Eldon Brace had come to England for a season as a relief choirboy, returning time and again as a young man to work among people he had grown to love. He spent two vacation summers in Brighton as a waiter at a seaside hotel and the experience had been compelling enough to bring him back this year. It was most of the reason why Brace had signed the quartet up for the London festival, persuading stay-at-home Kenyon to come along. "When in doubt, go," was Bracey's optimistic philosophy.

Now Kenyon said to Bert Feeley, "Do what you have to do." The oil painting he had been offered that afternoon was propped on the floor beside the bed. He raised his foot and drove it through the canvas, smashing the frame as he kicked the wreckage loose.

"Sarah won't like that," Feeley said. "She gives it to me on approval. Now we'll need a new one."

Regretting his display of anger, Kenyon felt desperate for something to say. "The police are onto you. I spoke to a man named Stainsforth."

"That Wally. They keep him to talk to the television reporters. Apart from that, he orders pencils and paper."

"I told him what I know."

"You know nothing. This is all an accident. Tell you what, I like you. I'm going to talk to Sarah and see if she can think of a way to let you live. Okay? Can't say fairer than that." Feeley gestured at the broken painting. "But first you can clean up your mess."

Kenyon bent obediently to gather up the shattered painting. He

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saw Feeley's shadow move on the carpet, but the raising of a protective arm came too late. The cosh crashed down on the back of his head and that was all.

"Remember me?"

Kenyon tried to sit up and fell back, his arms bound behind him, his head throbbing. He was lying in a moving vehicle, some sort of small van. The flashlight held by the woman crouching beside him illuminated her features from underneath, reminding him of times when, as children, he and his friends made goblin faces. "Who are you?"

"From the antique shop," she said in a businesslike voice. "I'm Sarah, Bert's associate. Sarah Hobday."

Hearing her jolly-hockeysticks delivery, Kenyon thought, "God help me, she's one of those. An English private-education psychopath. She's got a degree from Roedean, and she subscribes to a fund for retired pit ponies. And I'm in big trouble."

"I'm sorry we have to kill you," she went on. "It really is a pity, because there's nothing in it for us. But you know too much."

Kenyon tried to think about saving himself, but only disjointed images came into his mind. He pictured Gloria back at the hotel in Bayswater, having lost Eldon and now about to lose him. She would have two empty seats beside her on the flight home. He remembered an uncompleted illustration for the Dinosaur and knew now exactly how to draw the Jungle Fleas.

"You're still alive," the woman said, "because we want your blood in Putney. Keep you apart from the others. Naked and bludgeoned on the south coast is one thing, fully clothed and stabbed in London ought to be quite another."

For years, Bracey had teased Kenyon about his refusal to leave town. The friends used to have fun together, meeting for lunch, going to the Forum to watch hockey when Bracey's business tickets weren't being used, making the rounds of several taverns on a hot, beer-drinking summer evening. During the bad time leading to Bracey's divorce, he moved in and slept at Kenyon's studio apartment. Before that, when the Quartet Society convention took place at Manoir Tobias and Bracey had connected with Gloria Lannerman, Kenyon used to vacate his place and go visit his parents so the lovers would have somewhere to shack up.

"That was no great favor," Gloria had told Kenyon a few days ago

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while Bracey was still alive and out somewhere, letting his considerable light shine on another lucky lady.

"You say it but you don't mean it."

"The excitement is worth a lot," Gloria conceded. "But, my God, it passes. It would be a change to have a man I can depend on."

A response seemed called for, so Kenyon spoke up. "I'm yours whenever you say."

"Don't joke," she told him quietly. "I may take you up on it." And then, frowning at the rusty shower cubicle installed like a telephone booth in a corner of the hotel bedroom, she'd said, "His famous England. I don't know what he sees in it. You were right, Maurice, not to want to come."

The van made a sharp turn so that Kenyon was thrown sideways. "Bert!" he yelled at the top of his voice, so abruptly that Sarah Hobday lifted the flashlight like a weapon. "Feeley!" he cried. "Can you hear me?" He was shouting for his life.

The noise of the engine diminished. From the front, Feeley's voice called, "What's up?"

"Don't do this! I never hurt you!"

"What choice have we got?"

"You can put me somewhere—hold me prisoner—do your other thing—take off for Spain!"

"Very untidy!" Feeley shouted. "So much could go wrong! This way, nothing can go wrong!"

"How far to Putney Vale?" Sarah cut in.

"Half an hour," Feeley predicted. "First light."

"My little sister was at Putney Vale," the woman said to her prisoner. "But only for a while. Then she left. By way of the crematorium chimney."

As Feeley had promised, the sky was pale in the east behind the cemetery, still dark with stars over the other horizon. The motor of the van was left idling as Kenyon crawled out awkwardly, his arms fastened behind his back. He stretched—and saw the knife in Feeley's hand. They were really going to do it to him.

The road was deserted, bending out of sight around an outcropping of rock surmounted by pine saplings. At this hour, nobody would come driving along to rescue Kenyon. He would have to save himself.

"Why do I get all the heavy jobs?" Feeley complained. His voice was merry but his eyes were grim.

"You found him," Sarah said as she climbed behind the wheel,

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"you lose him." She put the vehicle in gear. "I'll drive down the road a mile or two and have a cigarette. When I come back, you be ready."

There was near silence after the van was gone. Feeley said, "Let's go over by those trees."

"Do me a favor, Bert?"

The knife was a kitchen utensil—wooden handle, six-inch blade. Feeley was holding it loosely for the moment, balanced on the palm of his hand. "Want a last request?" he said. "A final meal? There's no telephone or we could order chinese."

"Untie me. Don't kill me trussed up like this."

"You must be joking."

Kenyon stopped walking toward the trees and Feeley halted beside him. It was something. "I realize you have to kill me, Bert. I'm not pleased, I assure you." He started laughing and his captor joined in. "But I know you have no choice. Not now. You'd have let me go if I hadn't gone inside the closet. It's my own doing that we're here now."

"That's true."

"Bert, listen. All I want to do is shake your hand. I'm not crazy, I've had time to think. I've made my peace." A joyous momentum was building up inside Kenyon. He understood how people like Bert and Sarah must feel, implicitly believing a flawed premise. "We all go to God. Me. Sarah. You, Bert. I'm just going a little sooner. Listen to me—"

"What?" Feeley's voice was still trembling on the edge of giddy laughter.

"We made a connection, didn't we? Remember in the pub? The beer, the talk? The way we shook hands? Didn't you feel something crossing over between us?" It was true, Kenyon could remember the joining together.

Feeley didn't have to ponder. "There *was* a connection," he agreed.

"All I want is to shake hands again. Like we did." Maurice put himself with his back to Feeley, his bound wrists extended. "After that, who knows? If people do meet on the other side, we'll have something to go on with."

Feeley said, after a long pause, "I keep dreaming about Sarah's young sister. I was with *her* first. Then Sarah came back from Spain and I went with Sarah. The young one couldn't take that and she topped herself."

"Horrible," Kenyon said, hardly hearing what the man was saying.

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"We had the cremation right here. On a day like this one is going to be."

"Untie me, Bert."

Another pause, a brief one, and then the knife whipped through the bindings. It was a sharp knife and Kenyon's hands were free, drawn out in front of him, arms throbbing. The time was now. If he did any more thinking, the moment would pass and he'd be delivering himself back to be killed. He put out his right hand. "So long, Bert."

Feeley passed the knife from his right hand to his left and took the other man's hand in the intimate thumbs-up double fist. Kenyon leaned in and pulled hard at the same time, driving the crown of his head into Feeley's face, butting him ferociously between the eyes. Feeley staggered, sank to one knee, and the knife fell. Kenyon was on it, gripping the handle in both hands. He brought the blade back and pounded it into Feeley's stomach, dragged it out, and threw it, spinning, glistening wet red in the sunlight, far away among the trees.

Feeley rolled onto his side, knees up, mouth open, eyes bulging. "Oh, sweet Jesus."

Kenyon balanced on all fours beside him. "See," he said, "you made a mistake. You think *you're* wicked and the rest of us are sheep for you to slaughter when it suits you. Not true. Inside, I'm just as vicious as you are."

"It's starting to hurt."

"Good. You murdered my friend. I'll be back soon, and if you aren't dead maybe I'll bury you alive."

Kenyon walked a staggering path toward the road. He came to the rise in the ground and stood behind it, staring west. No sign yet of the van. He searched for a heavy stone and found one, a jagged ten-pounder. He positioned himself where he could see the road and not be seen.

The noisy engine gave plenty of warning. Kenyon felt exhilarated. He would be given only one shot, but it was going to work, it had to go in. The engine began to slow, she knew where she was. He stepped up onto a high point, aimed, and flung the stone at the face behind the windshield. Glass shattered and the van careened off the road, accelerating, tipping onto its side, wheels spinning.

Kenyon waited to see if Sarah Hobday would emerge from the wreck. When she didn't, he ran across the road, climbed onto the

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van, swung open the door, and peered down in at the driver. "Morning, Sarah," he said in his cheeriest summer-camp voice.

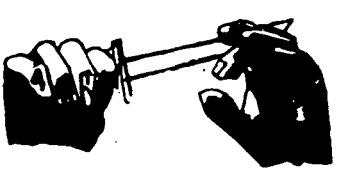
"Help me, please." She could barely pronounce her words. There was blood on her face.

"Feeley is dead," Kenyon said, "or dying. I'm off to ring the police. Can't stop at the moment." His projection was louder than necessary, inappropriate to the situation, exactly her bloody grammar-school cup of tea. "Sorry about that," he said, and left her in the ticking vehicle with a wheel still turning slowly.

He began the long walk down the road toward a cluster of roofs in the distance. He would find a telephone there. He thought of Stainsforth, the pedantic detective in Brighton, and wondered what he would make of these events. He thought of Gloria. She would not be going home alone, after all. Just possibly, that good woman would now be less alone than she had ever been. And so might he.

A car went past, the driver paying some attention to a solitary man walking at this odd hour of the day. Kenyon thought of signaling for a lift, but decided against it because he did not want to talk to anybody right now.

The truth was, strangely enough after what had been happening, that Kenyon was discovering something about himself. It had to do with his reaction to this unique arrangement of metropolis set in a sea of medieval countryside, and of villains scattered among a population of highly civilized people. For the first time, it was getting through to Maurice Kenyon what his old friend Bracey had liked about England.



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"How much can you tell from people by their garments?" said Willie. "Who is honest, who is a crook, who is good-natured—"

"—who is hungry," his brother Morris said. "Me . . . "

MR. PSYCHOLOGIST

by SEAN McMARTIN

The little man hunched over the sewing put the final stitch in the hem of a skirt and tossed it onto a pile of garments on the corner table. He pushed his thick-lensed glasses up into his wooly mass of grey hair, dug at his eyes wearily, and moved to the window. The light from the street lamp in the middle of the block barely reached the black lettering on the glass—*Wiener Bros.—Cleaners and Tailors*. Morris Wiener's lined face was worried as he peered out into the menacing darkness.

His brother Willie was standing behind the counter staring at a rack of clothing next to the pressing machine. A smile made creases from his nose to his chin. He was only two years younger than Morris and nearly bald, but the shiny, boyish roundness of his face made the difference seem greater.

"All right, Willie," Morris said, plodding out of the curtained cubicle. "Quarter after eight."

Willie sighed but didn't move.

"Come," Morris said impatiently. "You know this neighborhood. The street is already deserted."

"Sure, sure," Willie answered absently.

Morris shrugged his narrow shoulders and pulled the green shade the length of the door.

"Morris," his brother said, cocking his head to one side and fingering the sleeve of a grey-faille dress. "Mrs. McGuire's little one is getting a new tooth."

"How do you know?"

"Look," Willie said. "Egg. Little Eileen's gums hurt, so she throws her food on momma. Every few months food on the dresses. Little things, big stories."

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"It's now seventeen minutes past eight," Morris said. "Why every night must we have psychology before we close?"

Willie appeared not to be listening.

"How much you can tell from people by their garments? Who is honest, who is a crook, who is good-natured—"

"—who is hungry," Morris said. "Me."

Willie pulled a tweed suit off the rack. "Dry clean," he read off the pink ticket pinned to the lapel. "Repair cuffs." He replaced the suit. "Two years since Mr. Benson has had a new suit. Once upon a time two new ones a year. Now only cuffs. Soon no more pants."

Morris turned to a clothing dummy. "A psychologist," he said. "Come, Mister Psychologist-with-stories, let's go."

Willie slipped a tape measure from around his neck and hung it over a nail on the wall. "Not yet," he said. "Officer Sheehan's tuxedo for the Policeman's Ball tonight. Mrs. Sheehan is sending him to pick it up on the way off duty. You go alone, Morris."

Morris perched his hat in the center of his head and shut his eyes. "He won't come, Willie," he droned. "He has already assured me his blue-serge suit will do very well for the ball. How many times have you heard him say he hates soup-and-fishes?"

Willie gave his brother a tolerant smile. "In their house, Mrs. Officer Sheehan is the sergeant."

Morris plopped into the customer's chair at the far end of the counter. He clasped his hands in front of him and opened and closed his knees against them nervously. "You were sure about Mrs. Palumbo until eight-thirty last night," he said. "We are still waiting for her. If Officer Sheehan were coming, he would be here. He gets off duty at eight." He sniffed. "Tell me how your Sophie stands for you."

Willie hitched up his trousers. "All right, Morris, you know so much. You know how I am sure?"

The shade rattled against the door. Willie smiled at his brother. "Hah hah," he said triumphantly.

A thin, dark young man with a crew haircut and nervously blinking eyes walked in and closed the door with his foot. The brothers looked at each other.

"We are closed," Morris said quickly. "Come back tomorrow, please."

The man's eyes darted around the store. His hand came out of his side pocket gripping a small pistol. It trained steadily on the middle button of Morris's vest.

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"Can't wait," he said softly. He motioned toward the counter. "Get back with him, Pop. Nobody'll get hurt."

Morris's mouth flopped. "A gangster in my store," he groaned. "Always I knew this would happen."

An impatient movement from the gun hastened his steps.

"Hands on the counter," the man said.

"Do as he says, Morris," Willie said sadly. "He is not used to this, I can tell. If he gets nervous, there will be an accident."

The gunman gave him a menacing look. He nodded toward the cash register. "Hurry up."

Willie moved to the cash register and shrugged. "You can have all of it. Money I can give freely."

Morris stared at him in pain. "Stop talking, already."

Willie's mouth widened into a smile. He rang up No Sale and his hand stopped at the open drawer. "Please correct me if I'm wrong," he said. "This is the first time, no? You have walked for hours before you decide maybe it is best. A wife, maybe a little one or two? Or a mother who is sick?"

The young man advanced the gun a few inches persuasively.

Willie's eyes didn't blink. "That stitching on your lapel. Not so expert. A young woman's work?"

The man's eyes did not drop. His eyebrows creased together.

"Hah," Willie said. "A stab in the dark."

The man leaned against the counter and cursed. His hand holding the gun tightened. Morris licked his lips. "Willie, Willie," he said. "Stop talking and give."

Willie shook his head slowly. "The devoted heart knows no laws," he said. "I'll make you a loan of the money. I don't even see the gun." He pulled out a package of bills. "You will return this."

Morris choked. "Big shot," he said, "with a gun at his throat."

"My brother is a cynic," Willie said confidentially to the gunman.

The young man grabbed the bills and grinned. "You're a screwball," he said, backing up slowly, fanning the gun from one to the other.

"Maybe," Willie said. "but I make a boast there is no man I cannot read his looks."

The shade rattled against the door again. The gunman's face twitched. He whirled and in a split second Willie moved. A yardstick came down with a clatter and the gun went sailing across the room. A mass of blue hit the young man below the knees and banged him against the counter.

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"I told you he would come," Willie said nonchalantly.

Officer Sheehan clicked a pair of handcuffs across the holdup man's wrists. "You're lucky, you two. I figured you'd be closed this late, so I just peeked into the window before I tried the door. If I hadn't—"

Morris ran out in front of the counter and gathered up the scattered bills. Officer Sheehan yanked his prisoner aside. His heavy features worked into a ferocious scowl. "I've seen this punk around," he said. "I hate to think what this neighborhood's coming to with the likes of him running loose." He shoved the man ahead of him. "Anyway, you two can come down to the station and appear against him first thing tomorrow morning."

Willie shook his head. "A painful duty." He beckoned toward the rack. "Later you can pick up your tuxedo at my apartment."

Officer Sheehan bounced his man toward the door with a growl. "Yeah, I suppose so."

When they were alone, Morris waved the bills under his brother's nose, then stuffed them into his pockets. "Mister Psychologist," he said tensely. "Mister Psychologist and the good thief."

Willie smiled, pulled the tuxedo off the rack, and handed it to his brother to carry.

"You were always an excitable boy, Morris," he said. "That is why you have ulcers."

Morris looked at him in disgust. "I am only a tailor, Willie. Not a big shot. To me a thief is a thief."

"A tailor, Morris?" Willie asked slyly. "A butcher, better. Remember the stitching on that hooligan's lapel? Even with your weak eyes you should have recognized Hyam Solstein's bungling. Tan thread on a dark-brown suit. Who else but Hyam sews like that?"

Morris squinted into space. "Hyam Solstein from the shop on Sherman Avenue?" He cocked his head to one side. "It's possible."

Willie took his hat from the shelf, emptied the cash register, and slapped his brother on the back. "Come, Morris, we eat."

Morris looked narrowly at him. "You were stalling, Willie?"

"I was stalling, Morris."

"Supposing Officer Sheehan had not come? What then?" He drew a finger across his throat. "Willie, you are still a fool."

Willie reached over and pulled a crumpled blue-serge suit out of the bin. "Not such a fool," he said drily. "This morning she brought this in herself, Mrs. Sheehan—for delivery *next week.*"

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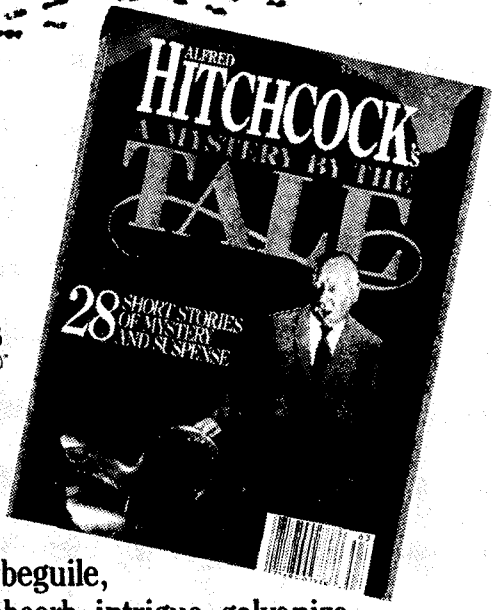

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There it was again—the frisson. Sometimes Ken experienced it on the job when he was faced with sudden danger, or in the garden when he encountered unexpected animal life. He made himself ask, "Is something bothering you, Marie . . .?"

THE LIGHT IN MARTIN'S ROOM

by RUTH GRAVIROS

The light was on in Martin's room when Ken turned into the driveway, but the windows went dark a few seconds after he stepped out of the Mark IV onto the gravel and slammed the car door behind him. It wasn't that late for a Saturday night, not even one yet, but maybe Martin was tired from his full day at the supermarket. The manager probably gave him the heaviest stock and delivery jobs because of his size—the big kids always got worked like horses, as if there was no limit to their strength and energy. Nobody stopped to consider that they needed some of that strength and energy for the other things in their lives—studies, sports, girls. Ken had never been in better shape than when he was a Marine on his way to Vietnam, but even then he had his limits—he'd fall into bed at night wondering how he was going to drag himself out in the morning. It was the only time they gave him to think of Marie, he remembered. But she sure as hell had provided him with some sweet dreams.

As far as Ken knew, Martin didn't have a girl he especially cared about. When he went out, when he wasn't at school or working or playing ball, it was with a mixed group of friends to a movie or a concert. Otherwise, his head was stuck in a book or he watched television. He didn't spend a lot of time on the phone with anyone. When Ken was Martin's age, fifteen, he was superinterested in girls. Well, as things had turned out he guessed he still was. In fact—he patted his unweighted hip—they seemed to be driving him to distraction. He opened the car door and reached across to the glove

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compartment for the gun and holster he was forgetting. Judy was the most complaisant woman he'd ever known, with the possible exception of his mother, but she refused to have the gun in her apartment. Marie didn't like it in the house, either, but she understood and accepted the Department rule.

Back outside, fastening the gun belt, Ken observed the dark textured greens of the garden in the moonlight, every square foot of it given over to vegetables. The lush abundance heightened his mood of well being.

The wonders he had worked with the reluctant acidic soil and the astonishing results Marie had achieved with its bounty, first creating surprising dishes for themselves, then for their friends, and now selling a staggering repertoire of soups and salads and sauces, appetizers, entrees, and desserts to the catering services and gourmet shops that were sprouting all over Manhattan and Queens. It had taken her some time to convince him at first, but when the praise and the profits poured in and he saw how happy it made her, his objections became an uneasy memory.

A series of shrill squeals came from the Kaminskys' next door. Pete and Sheree playing poker with Pete's brother and niece as Pete's mother, who had Alzheimer's, sat and looked on. The niece, a nurse, young but drab, had come to live with them for the duration. A miserable deal for all of them, but Ken cringed at the strident gaiety Sheree forced out of their Saturday-night poker games. Winning or losing, it was all the same—she had to pretend shocked disbelief in the cards as dealt and played. Grandstanding her pluck? He wondered if it got on the family's nerves. It would drive him away. That whole situation there would. He was a lucky man that he had never been given a problem he couldn't live with.

His own kitchen light was on, beaming out on the parsnips and rutabagas. Hollow Crown and Purple Top, almost ready for harvest. No one visible in the kitchen—Marie was probably down in the basement watching *Saturday Night Live*. An aromatic breeze rustled the plants and surrounding trees. It could turn cold and stay cold any day now. He'd miss getting up early and coming out to see to the watering of the vegetable beds that needed it. He'd always been partial to green—his eyes reached for it wherever he went. Even on television it had an appeal no other color approached, especially red. Marie agreed—red was ugly on TV, where even green snakes and insects were more pleasing to the eye than red roses or poinsettias.

A cloud covered the moon. Ken climbed the back steps and went

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inside, locking the kitchen door behind him and dousing the porch light. The spacious kitchen was in perfect order and smelled of chocolate and cinnamon. The door to the basement recreation room was open and the lights on. He could hear Frank Sinatra singing "I've got a crush on you, sweetie pie—" A comedian into an uncanny imitation probably.

On the kitchen table was a bowl of fava beans Marie or Martin must have brought in, shelled, and salted. He filled his fist and, Sinatra perhaps evoking the past and a Perry Como record that had inspired a playful love call he and Marie had worked out between them just before she split for college and he for the Marines, he announced his presence as he descended the stairs. "Pa-pa-pa-*paya*," he sang. ("Don't let the stars get in your eyes, don't let the moon break your heart . . .") "Pa-pa-pa-*paya*."

The TV screen was dark but the pine-paneled room was aglow, every light burning. Marie, wearing her short, sexy white-silk robe and high-heeled slides, stood at the bar, her back to him, a Michelob Light cleared to the side as she intently worked over some columns of figures on a lined yellow pad of paper. She had been promoted well upward in the accounting department at Bergdorf Goodman when she quit to have babies. She kept the family books and did the taxes.

The creases at the backs of her knees crossed her tanned legs like scars. He moved in behind her, enfolding her arms with his and nuzzling his face in her soft dark hair, damp and curly from the shower the way he loved it. He was a pistol tonight.

"Pa-pa-pa-*paya*. Pa-pa-pa-*paya*."

She was supposed to repeat the phrase in imitation chicken-cackle. She silently continued working figures, ignoring him.

What was the word for the unpleasant shudder he felt? (They'd sat around the table after dinner when Marie's college friend Jean visited from California last year and, inspired by Ken's description of some of his weirdest experiences on duty, talked about spooky physical feelings—deja vu, angst, ESP.) *Frisson*, that was it.

He stepped to her side and, his left arm around her shoulders, leaned on the bar, peering with playful interest at the neat small numbers she was jotting on the paper. There were several pages full of them, as if she had been at them a long time. They made no sense to him. He'd never taken an interest in math—dealt with it only as needed to get through school, Marine training and combat, police training and combat. He supposed he used it more than he real-

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ized—measuring out the garden, taking photographs, doing repairs and a little carpentry. Maybe it was figures accompanied by dollar and cent signs and decimal points that put him off.

"You never rest, my darling," he said. "You should be watching the box, or—" he kissed her "—getting your beauty sleep."

She pulled away from the kiss and remained intent on her work, leaving no doubt that her concentration was an intentional slight. Wrong, he thought—he was *not* a pistol tonight. He moved away, taking off his uniform jacket and folding it neatly on the back of the recliner, then going behind the bar and assembling a glass, selzer, and a fifth of Wild Turkey. He shook the can of Michelob and tossed it in the plastic-lined barrel with the other empties. "Want another? Or something stronger?"

"No, thanks," she said indifferently, not looking up, the ballpoint starting a new column of figures, young Rosemary Clooney lilting "If you loved me half as much as I love you" on the radio at the corner of the bar. Late-night WNEW. He scooped ice cubes from the icemaker, dropped them in the glass, and broke the seal on the whiskey.

"It was some game." He poured the whiskey. "Dwight Gooden. Do you know what that kid did today? He broke Seaver's record for hits by a pitcher. You should have seen the home run he hit in the first."

"I did."

His face lit up. "You did? You watched the game?"

"I had the set on in the kitchen."

"He's out to be the best hitting pitcher in baseball. Those four r.b.i.'s of his today were the most by a Mets pitcher since Terrell hit a pair of two-run homers against the Cubs two years ago."

"You sound like a sportscaster—except for the cigarette cough."

"What are you doing there?" He nodded at the paper, trying to will her to look at him.

"Thinking."

"Thinking?"

"Working something out."

She put the pen down and looked at him, her amazing, thick-lashed dark eyes knocking him out, as they had for over twenty years. His hand crept toward hers and she, not inadvertently, used that hand to rub her eyelids tiredly. "I will have a drink."

He indicated the Wild Turkey.

"Not that. Gin and tonic."

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He watched her watch him prepare the drink, her mesmerizing eyes calm but—what? Sad? Determined? Or just tired?

He set the drink before her and pulled the stool behind the bar closer and sat. "So you watched the game."

"Intently."

"You're in a funny mood, sweetheart."

"Sweetheart."

There it was again—the frisson. Sometimes he experienced it on the job when he was faced with sudden danger, or in the garden when he encountered unexpected animal life. He made himself ask. "Is something bothering you, Marie?"

"Yes."

He waited. Whatever it was, she was certainly making him work for it. "*What's* bothering you, Marie?"

"Judy Ruf."

A spasm of nausea swept through him but he covered it with a puzzled frown. "Judy Ruf from high school? What about her?"

"Spare me. I told you—I watched the game. Surely you know the camera came in on you in the stands, big and stupid as life."

"Your imagination's playing tricks on you, honey. Judy may have been at that game with some guy that looks like me, but I didn't see her. I was there on duty. As you well know."

"Do I? A lot fell into place when that camera zoomed in on you. You suddenly getting details after a couple of years of being beyond them—into overtime put in on a higher level. You must think I'm slow."

"I was on a detail." He spread his arms—uniform shirt and pants, gun.

"You were wearing your green Lacoste. And those terrible madras pants I thought you threw out because I hate them."

"How can I convince you?"

"You can't." She ran her hands through her hair, testing it for dryness. "I never thought you'd play around. I never once thought I wasn't enough for you. The epitome of arrogance. But if I had been suspicious you were two-timing me, I'd have imagined a dozen different types before I'd begin to think of someone like Judy Ruf. When her name came up in high school the guys used to bark—meaning they thought she was a dog, not that she excited them."

Ken remembered. "Whoever you saw with her at the game today wasn't me. A lot of men wear those clothes, Marie. Everyguy, that's me."

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"Does she launder them for you? How much of your wardrobe do you keep at her place? Where does she live now, anyway?"

"I wouldn't know," he said coldly. "I can't believe I'm sitting still for these accusations. How would you like it if I thought I saw you with a man and didn't take your word for it that it wasn't true?"

Marie tasted her drink as he spoke and made a face to tell him he'd made it too strong as usual. "Judy," she said, reaching for the tonic, "was a couple of classes below me at Andrew Jackson. In more ways than one. It can't be because she's younger. She's not that much younger. But maybe you don't have to be younger to make a man feel younger. Midlife crisis, is that what it is?"

"You tell me. You're the one who's full of answers about this phantasm of yours." He finished his drink and filled the glass with ice and straight bourbon.

"How come you don't suggest I call Lieutenant Kaye to verify that you had a detail at Shea today?"

"Are you crazy?"

"Martin may have seen you, too, you know. They keep the TV on in the back room there for the kids to watch during their breaks. He was unusually quiet when he came home."

Oh, God. "They work him too hard there for that."

"Denial."

"If he was quiet, he's probably tired. He's back on a tough schedule at school. Homework, exams, football practice."

"Which he hates."

He stared at her. "What?"

"You've tried to make a jock out of him since he could walk. He likes sports all right, as a spectator. He despises the participation, the emphasis on it in his life. He told me the other day he's never met a coach he didn't hate."

"That's too bad. They've all spoken well of him. Does that include Little League?"

She met his eyes, then looked away. "You'd have to ask him."

Ken had managed Martin's Little League team. The boy had had a good eye and steady nerves. He'd been an unexpectedly effective player for one so compliant and non-competitive. When he felt he could trust his voice, Ken said, "He tells you all this without letting me in on it, is that the point you're making?"

She watched him fill his glass again. "I don't know all he does or doesn't tell you. I only know what he tells me."

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"His not enjoying athletics is a complete surprise to me. Is there anything else about this son of ours I should know that I don't?"

"I told you, I don't know what you know and what you don't know."

"Stop that, damn you! If we're going to fight, and it looks like we're going to, be straight about it. I hate it when you get la-de-da and superior. I fell for you because you're an earthy broad. That means down-to-earth."

She opened her mouth to say something, and closed it.

"What?"

"No, it was going to be more of the same. Mix me another, will you? I have to use the bathroom. Lighter this time, please."

There was a lavatory to the side of the stairs but she went upstairs. He finished his drink and fixed a fresh one for each of them, making a concerted effort to make hers noticeably weaker, admitting to himself that he didn't know how to make a light drink any more. On the radio, Bob Jones was continuing the Milkman's Matinee after the news.

Ken came out from behind the bar and wandered the room. Everyone had better now—fancier paneling, more sophisticated track lighting, softer carpeting—but they'd been the first of their friends with a pine-paneled recreation room. They'd done it themselves, he and Marie, she pregnant with their second child, Dennis. They'd worked late into the night, midday, whenever they found the time, sometimes with Martin in the playpen nearby, or tucked away for the night or a nap. Once they'd made love on the floor, the woodsy, aromatic shavings sharp against their skin.

He loved what Marie had done in furnishing the room and the rest of the house to make it tasteful and comfortable and welcoming. Mrs. Burke came in to clean one morning a week and he never saw Marie do any heavy cleaning any more but there was always the sense of everything in its place, everything running like clockwork. He'd known before he asked her to marry him that it would be this way, maybe because her mother ran her house like that or maybe it was his impression of Marie herself, the style and composure and discipline she carried with her. Part of the irresistible package.

From upstairs came the smell of coffee on the perk. He should have known. In a few minutes she'd be down with a tray, balancing herself sexily on those ridiculous slippers. Coffee in mugs, his with milk and sugar, hers black, and sandwiches or a dessert. The condemned man ate a hearty meal.

That was a stupid thought. But he dreaded a quarrel with Marie.

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It was the last thing he wanted. He didn't want to lie to her, either. But how could he possibly make her understand his involvement with Judy Ruf? He didn't understand it himself. He cared nothing for the woman. They'd met in the lobby of her building one night—when? five months ago?—when he and Jerry Bruno were investigating a burglary call and he'd accepted her invitation to come by for a drink sometime and talk about old times. Why had he done that?

He remembered why. Because she'd phoned him at the station every day for the rest of the week, refusing to take no for an answer.

Which still didn't explain why he'd given in and gone back to see her again. And gotten involved. She was a fluffhead. She taught school somewhere, God help us. She never talked about her work or the kids she taught. All she seemed to care about was clothes and having a man on the string and staying young, being trendy.

What was his excuse?

Up in the kitchen, the refrigerator door was being opened and closed. The Old Philosopher was drumming up business for the Claridge Casino in Atlantic City. "It's nice to hear Eddie Lawrence around again," Bob Jones said and introduced a new recording, George Shearing and Stephane Grappelli performing "The Folks That Live on the Hill." If Marie were down here now he'd take her in his arms and they'd dance, forget their troubles.

The gun belt was heavy on his hip. He took it off and placed it carefully on the top of the bookcase to the side of the bar. Marie's footsteps sounded on the stairs and he went to take the tray from her. "What's this?" he asked, transferring two dishes of dark-chocolate cake, cloth napkins, and the coffee onto the bar and propping the empty tray against the bookcase.

"*Dolce Torinese*. New recipe." Marie climbed onto a bar stool and drew the dish with the smaller portion toward her. "Be honest about it."

He resumed his seat behind the bar, tasted, and feigned a swoon.

"I'm afraid I'm getting seriously into desserts," she said. "That wedding cake last month may be my undoing." She had planned and prepared all the food for her niece's wedding three Saturdays before, everything from the canapes to the cake, an enormous concoction heavy with whipped cream and raspberries. Her sister and brother-in-law would owe them forever for that one, Ken thought. Marie hated it when he talked that way, so he didn't voice it.

She finished her few bites of cake and lit a cigarette to smoke

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with her coffee. "Didn't it occur to you that the camera could pick you up in the stands?" she said. "You know they pick up on the crowd. Remember laughing at that couple who went pale when Dave Letterman went up into the audience a couple of months ago? They finally had the presence of mind to cover their faces."

He didn't answer. He drank his coffee and tried to think, but his mind was empty.

"I notice you've stopped denying it." She turned her head away to exhale smoke.

"Does it do any good when I do?"

"She's been calling here, you know. And hanging up when I answer. I didn't know what was going on. When I saw you together tonight, I realized she's exactly the type to do that."

"She means nothing to me, Marie. Absolutely nothing."

"I'd like it if you'd make some sense."

"Maybe I'm just flattered by her attention."

"So now I'm not giving you enough attention."

"I didn't say that. I don't think that."

His fastidious Marie did a surprising thing, dropping the half finished cigarette into her coffee and pushing the mug away from her. "It's the elaborateness of your deceit. Going out in uniform, changing, then changing back into it to come home."

"I guess I was that desperate for you not to guess anything was going on."

"Desperate to make your double life work, you mean."

He studied her face. Her gaze was off to the side. Sad. "Are you embarrassed that people we know may have seen me?"

She gave it thought. "I don't think I mind that. I mind the possibility that Martin saw you. I mind that it doesn't seem to have occurred to you that he might see you." She watched him reach for a clean glass and then down for some ice. He filled the glass and took a deep pull of the straight bourbon. "That's over a hundred proof. You shouldn't be drinking so much of it so fast."

"I wish I could take this whole thing with Judy back, Marie. It was harmless."

"Is that what you think?"

"I don't have to tell you I'll never see her again, do I?"

Her eyes on him grew intense, then moist. "It won't matter if you do, Ken. We're leaving you."

He must have set the drink down on a solid surface because he was no longer holding it.

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"You're kidding," he said, or thought he said.

"You love this house too much for me to throw you out. Martin and I can find a place out on the island. Or maybe in Manhattan."

"One indiscretion, Marie! All we've built together and you'd leave me over one idiotic indiscretion! And take Martin with you? It's not fair. It doesn't make any sense. It's not like you."

She nodded. "Yes it is."

"No it's not. You're being vindictive."

"No. When I saw you together and took in what it meant, a door opened—I swear I could actually see a door opening in my head—and I knew I had to get away and that I have a right to get away. I haven't been especially happy for a long time. Maybe you sensed that, maybe it's why you took up with the first woman who came on strong—"

"She isn't the first woman to come on strong!" He was seeing her through a haze.

"Be that as it may."

"There you go again. La-de-da. God, I hate that."

"You know what I hate?" she said, her face reaching toward him through the haze. "Your denial about problems as they arise. Your possessiveness. Your insular politics—buying only American products, not wanting to travel outside the country. Your lack of imagination."

"What do you know about my imagination? You don't know what goes on in my mind any more than I know what goes on in yours!"

"When I saw you today," she said, "I decided that if you have to go outside this house for your pleasures, if Martin and I aren't enough, we don't need to be here. I want to start a new life, Ken. I want to try not to make mistakes this time."

"What do you plan to do for money?" That wasn't what he meant to say. What he wanted to say was that he was remembering their wedding reception, on a small yacht they'd chartered to sail around New York harbor all that July afternoon. Champagne, a wandering accordionist playing songs on request. He caught the word "bankable."

"I'm bankable," she was saying. She had reached for the sheets of yellow paper and was saying something about having savings of her own and her sister and brother-in-law helping out if necessary.

He filled his empty glass. "Is that what you've been doing since the game? Counting your assets?"

"No. When Martin came home, we had some supper and watched

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a thing on PBS. Graham Greene. *Dr. Fischer of Geneva*, with Alan Bates and James Mason. Grim stuff. Very different from the way they were in *Georgy Girl*, that's for sure."

"Times have changed."

"I wish I could give you an argument."

"You said it's midlife crisis with me. As true for you as for me, wouldn't you say?" Beside him, on the radio, a woman sang "Goodbye, no use leading with our chins—" Keeley Smith. Nelson Riddle. The haze disappeared and Marie and the room came into clear focus, everything sharply defined. "Nelson Riddle died this week," he said.

She looked at him sharply. "Let's talk tomorrow."

"July nineteen sixty-seven. That yellow dress. I wouldn't have believed you could be more beautiful eighteen years later, but you are."

"I want to be on my own, Ken. I've wanted it for a long time, but it has nothing to do with you. You just gave me an excuse. Don't blame yourself."

"And with my best, my very best, I set you free—"

Ken reached over and turned off the radio. *Don't blame yourself—*

She'd screamed in the night. He'd never forget the sound. He'd worked late in connection with a drug bust and fallen into bed exhausted, but that scream would have wakened the dead. Except that it didn't. Dennis, four months old, was lifeless in his crib of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. SIDS, as mysterious to the medical world then as AIDS was now. Dr. Ventimiglia believed it was a matter of an immature nervous system that caused a failure in breathing during sleep. But he didn't really know any more than anyone else, he just offered it as one of the possible causes the medical profession had come up with, none of them suggesting that the parents of a crib-death child were in any way responsible.

Don't blame yourself, she'd told him over and over. And he'd told her the same thing, over and over, until they both stopped mentioning it forever.

"Haven't we had enough tragedy?" Ken reached for her hand and squeezed it. "Couldn't you just take a vacation? You could use one. That's all this is. You need some time to yourself, away from— Or I'll go."

"No." Marie took her hand from under his. "I'm sorry. You know how I am when I make up my mind about something."

"I'm fighting for my life here." He was crying now. "You act as if ditching this marriage isn't worth more than a few hours' thought.

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Martin's future. My future. What happened to all the genuine concern we've always had for one another?"

"I'm not abandoning that. We don't have to live under the same roof to be concerned about each other." She was off the stool and, through the haze that had returned (rosy now), setting the dishes and mugs on the tray. So complacent while his world was falling apart! His arm swept the tray. There was the sound of smashed glass and Marie was standing back, looking from the floor to her robe, the white splotched with chocolate, dripping coffee.

"See that?" he shouted, leaning across the bar, gesturing at the shattered crockery on the floor. "That's what you're doing to *us!*"

"I don't want to go on with this tonight," she said. "You won't remember a word of it tomorrow."

He shook his head. "There's another man. That's it. There must be."

"Oh, Ken." She turned away from him and headed for the stairs.

She was going—she was leaving him. She really meant to leave him. "Don't!" he called after her, his desperation and this new jealous suspicion hammering in his ears. She started up to the kitchen. Blindly, not taking his eyes from her luminous white back, he dove for his gun. Pulling it from the holster, he aimed and pulled the trigger. He heard the bullet hit bone as she fell forward against the staircase. She gave a little scream with the roar of the .38, not with terror or pain but as if she was suffering no more than an awkward, irritating fall.

By the time she had slid back down the stairs to the basement floor, she was dead, kneeling with her face resting on the third stair, her eyes closed on a frown, her mouth slack. Her back was a garish, unreal burst of red.

The haze parted once again and he thought, looking at her, that it would probably never occur to anyone that this had happened because she was deserting him. It might even be thought it was because he wanted to be rid of her. Then he heard the footsteps pounding down the stairs from the second floor, very fast, frantic, and the red haze closed in, filling his mind with the final thought that there were still more bullets in the gun in his hand.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Jonas Pickett story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

Tim found Pamela in the Art Room and said, "Laura's in Dan's study. She wants to see you. And, look—I'm afraid she's rather upset. Hardly responsible for what she says. So watch out."

"I'm not afraid of Mrs. Cullingford," said Laura coolly. "She can't kill me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you later," Laura said.

In her review of Michael Gilbert's End-Game *in* The New York Times, *Carolyn G. Heilbrun (Amanda Cross) said, "Michael Gilbert has written what I think of as the English male romance, in which the ideals of boyhood and youth make one either gallant or a renegade. He is also an ingenious storyteller . . ."*

WE'VE COME TO REPORT A MURDER, SIR

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"For the last few months," said Dan Cullingford, "I've been wondering about myself. And when you start wondering about yourself that keeps you awake at night, and when you don't sleep properly that makes you feel worse than ever."

"A great deal of illness is psychosomatic," agreed Jonas. "You look fit enough." His visitor had clear blue eyes and the face, more red than brown, of a man who lived much of his life in the open air.

"I've no reason not to be. I still take a lot of exercise. Now that I've only got the one full-time assistant, we have to share the games between us. On Wednesday I played an hour of football with the

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boys and felt perfectly all right whilst I was doing it. It was when I sat down afterward that I began to wonder."

"How old are you?"

"I'm the wrong side of fifty."

Jonas, who was the wrong side of sixty, thought of saying that he took a minimum of exercise and managed to get along all right, but realized that this would be little consolation to Dan Cullingford. Instead he said, "I suppose you've had a proper checkup?"

"I saw Dr. Brassie yesterday."

"What did he say?"

"The sort of thing doctors always say when they don't really know the answer. He said he thought it was possible I had what he called a tired heart—for a real checkup I should have to go into hospital for a day or two."

"He said that, did he," said Jonas thoughtfully. He knew Dr. Brassie was not an alarmist. "What did you say?"

"That I might be able to manage it at the end of term. That's only eight weeks away. However, I didn't really come to talk about my health. That was only incidental. I wanted you to advise me about remaking my will."

"There's an existing will, then?"

"I've brought it along." Dan fished a legal-looking envelope out of his pocket. "I made it when I got married. Hadn't bothered until then."

Jonas looked first at the envelope. It had the name Porter and Merriman on it. Cullingford saw him looking at it and said, "It was Ambrose Porter who did it for me. After he died, I never had anything more to do with the firm. I mean—it's all right to come to you, isn't it?"

Jonas, who, like all solicitors, was cautious about appropriating clients from other firms, said, "Yes, of course. If Ambrose Porter was the one you really went to and you haven't consulted them for ten years."

"I'm glad about that. His son's all right as a person, I mean. But he seemed a bit lacking in experience."

Jonas was aware that old men disliked consulting young solicitors. He was reading the will. It was a simple document under which Daniel Stanley Cullingford, schoolmaster, left everything to his wife, Laura, and appointed her sole executrix.

Cullingford said, "The real thing is that I'm worried about what might happen to the school if I popped off suddenly. I've got an

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excellent number two, a man named Tim Delavigne. He'd be happy to keep Clifton House going, but only if he could run the show himself."

"Understandable."

"And, as a matter of fact, it would work rather well, because there's a spot of romance in the air."

It took a prep-school master, thought Jonas, to refer to impending matrimony as a spot of romance. He said, "Who is she?"

"Pamela Ricketts. She looks after gym, painting, and music."

"All of them?"

"The iron law of economics. The days are past when you could employ specialists in every department. However, she's competent enough in music and art and a qualified P.E. instructor. She did two years at Bedford."

"P.E.?"

"In your day," said Cullingford patiently, "it was called Physical Training. Now it's Physical Education. A subtle difference."

"I learn a new fact every day," said Jonas. "Well, I can see that she'd make an admirable schoolmaster's wife. Tell me exactly what it is you want me to do."

Cullingford thought about this for some time. Then he said, "What I'm going to tell you is absolutely confidential."

"Of course."

"If I left my will as it is now, as soon as I was dead I think Laura would shut the school and sell the property. You know where it is. Between the Lewes Road and the factory estate. If she could get planning permission for development—and I don't see why she shouldn't—well, she'd get a great deal of money for it."

"I see," said Jonas. "You want to put it out of her power to sell the property, and you want Delavigne to have control of the actual running of the school."

"I don't want to cut her out altogether, you understand—it's just that I don't want her to be in a position to interfere with Tim."

Or with Mrs. Delavigne-to-be, thought Jonas. He could see considerable complications if the two ladies didn't get on together. He said, "I'll draft something for you to look at. It'll have to be a trust of some sort, and that means you'll need two trustees. Have you got two reliable friends who'd take the job on?"

"Major Gurney would do it, I'm sure."

"The headmaster of St. Oswald's? Yes, I know him. A very sound man."

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"The other one might be Leo Sambrooke. You may have seen his name in the High Street. A firm of estate agents. Leo Sambrooke and Dodds. His boy's at the school now."

"Sounds just the man for the job. Ask him if he's prepared to act." Jonas was examining his desk diary. "In fact, I see that Gurney is coming here this afternoon. He wants me to explain the new Finance Act to him. I could tell him what you want him to do, if you like."

"Please," said Cullingford. "And I'll tackle Sambrooke."

Jonas thought that he looked a bit more cheerful than he was when he came in.

"Clifton House is a good school," said Major Gurney, "and Dan Cullingford is a first-class teacher." He and Jonas had just spent an hour trying to understand the latest piece of gobbledygook put out by the Inland Revenue. "I'd hate to see another outfit go under. Do you realize that when I came here after the war, there were eight schools here? Now just three, Tanner's place, Bowden Lodge, my own place—and Cullingford's. Tanner and I aren't in competition with Dan. When he saw the other schools folding up, he read the signs correctly. He started to phase out all his boarders and take day boys instead. That was about six years ago. Clifton House is entirely a day school now."

"And there are enough of them to go round?"

"Certainly. In fact, he's got a waiting list. There are a lot of professional and business families in Shackleton who don't like the idea of sending their sons to state schools, but can't quite face boarding-school fees. Or who want to put off paying them as long as possible. And, incidentally, I think Dan's got a very good number two in Delavigne."

"I'm glad you think that," said Jonas, "because it will make it easier to explain what he has in mind."

He spoke for ten minutes. He was used to expounding legal technicalities to non-legal people, and when he had finished Major Gurney nodded his head.

"In words of one syllable," he said, "Dan wants to make sure his wife can't flog the lot as soon as he's in his grave."

"Correct," said Jonas. "And I do congratulate you. I've often heard people start by saying 'in words of one syllable,' but before now I've never known anyone to actually pull it off."

Gurney laughed and said, "Of course, one can see that she'd have every inducement to do it if she could. Tanner and I have both had

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that estate agent, Derek Price of Price and Westbury, nibbling round. He's dead keen to get hold of building land and would give a lot for the Clifton House playing fields. We both sent him off with a flea in his ear. To tell you the truth, I can't stand the chap."

"Thirtyish, fatter than he should be at that age, smooth dresser, drives a BMW?"

"That's the fellow. Chases girls as well as building land, so I'm told. One question. You realize I'm a bit older than Dan. What happens if I die first?"

"Then we appoint someone else. But I don't think it's likely to happen."

Gurney looked at Jonas shrewdly. "You don't think Dan's a very good life?"

"I happened to be talking to Dr. Brassie. Knowing that I'm Cullingford's solicitor, I suppose he felt able to be frank. What he said was, as long as Cullingford would exercise a little common sense and stop playing violent games of football on cold afternoons there's no reason he shouldn't go on happily for years."

"I see," said Gurney. "That's the form, is it? Well, thanks for telling me."

That was the second week in October. Dan Cullingford died on All Saints' Day, which fell on a Monday that year. He had been giving some sort of demonstration in the gym and had fallen dead. When Dr. Makepeace, the coroner, heard what Dr. Brassie had to say, he agreed there was no need for an inquest. The burial service, at St. Michael's, was conducted by the Reverend Arthur Tobias and the address was given by the Bishop of Lewes, who also conducted the committal. The sun was shining, but it gave out little heat, and Jonas, his coat collar turned up to his ears, felt a shiver run through him as the coffin was lowered into the ground. He had not known Cullingford long, but long enough to become fond of him.

The church had been jam-packed and most of the congregation had come out to the churchyard to witness the final rites. Laura was there, in a black suit over a cream-colored shirt, and veiled. The staff and the boys of Clifton House were all in attendance. Two of the boys stood in front of the bishop at the head of the grave when he spoke the words of committal. One of them, a stocky freckled boy, Jonas knew was Superintendent Queen's son. The other, a tall thin boy in spectacles, was not known to him. Both looked appropriately solemn.

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His secretary, Claire, who had come with Jonas, said, "I do hate that sort of thing. It's barbarous. Give me a quiet, private cremation every time."

"I don't know," said Jonas mildly. "A lot of people enjoy funerals. And it doesn't make any difference to the party chiefly concerned."

"Not to him," agreed Claire. "But I bet the leading lady was enjoying it all behind that tootsie little veil. She'll be round to see you in a day or two."

"Surely she'll wait for a bit. A decent interval, anyway."

"Would you care to bet on it?" said Claire. "I'll make it an even fiver that she turns up before the end of the week."

The telephone call came that Thursday, when Claire was in Jonas's room taking dictation. She lifted the receiver, listened impassively, and said in her most secretarial voice, "It's Mrs. Cullingford, sir. She wants to know if she can come and have a word with you."

"Monday morning?" suggested Jonas hopefully.

"You're in Eastbourne on Monday and Tuesday on that planning inquiry." Claire had the desk diary open. "You've nothing on before midday tomorrow."

"All right." Jonas sighed, took a five-pound note out of his wallet, and passed it across the desk. "Tell her eleven o'clock."

When Laura Cullingford arrived, she was wearing the same black suit but she had brightened it up with a fuchsia scarf at the throat and Jonas concluded that her sorrow for the loss of her husband was likely to be short-lived. He knew quite well what she had come to talk about, and after five minutes of sparring she came to the point.

She said, "My husband showed me the will he made. I meant to bring it along with me, but it seems to have disappeared. He told me he was coming to see you. Did he show it to you, perhaps?"

"He showed it to me," said Jonas slowly. "That was the first time he came to see me. When he came here again—that was a week later—to sign his new will, he tore the old one up. Anyway, it was no longer effective, because the new will totally revoked the old one. But I always think it's a mistake to have too many wills hanging about. It can easily lead to confusion."

He had dragged this statement out to give Laura time to react. He saw the flush rising in her cheeks and the tightening of her mouth.

She said, "He never told me he was making a new will."

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"No?"

"Wasn't that rather unusual?"

"Not really. I expect he planned to tell you about it later. There was no reason to worry about it whilst he was alive and well."

"Worry me? Why should it have worried me?" Her feelings were very near the surface now.

"I've had copies made for you and the two executors. Perhaps you'd better read it."

Laura looked at the document Jonas had put on the desk in front of her but seemed unwilling to pick it up. She said, "Two executors? What are you talking about? I'm his executor. The sole executor. He told me so."

"That was in the old will. The executors in his new will are Major Gurney and Leopold Sambrooke."

"Do they know about this?"

"They know about it and have agreed to act." Seeing that Laura was making no attempt to read the document, Jonas said, "You might find some of the legal terms confusing. Shall I explain it to you?"

Laura said, "Yes." Her mouth was scarcely open and the word came out like a hiss.

"Well, to start with, he leaves you all his personal chattels. That's to say, everything he possessed outside the school."

"Which was nothing. He had nothing except the school."

"I wouldn't say that. Everyone has something. Furniture, books, pictures, shares, money in the bank."

"No shares. And an overdraft in the bank."

"All right," said Jonas, who was finding Laura hard to take. "He may not have had much, but what he did have is yours."

"The school. Tell me about the school."

"He left the school and the grounds to his executors."

"What!" Not a hiss this time. A scream. "He left the school to old Gurney and Sambrooke. Why? What had they done to deserve it?"

"Hold your horses. He didn't leave it to them beneficially. They hold it on trust."

"Trust?"

"The will tells them what to do with it. As long as the school carries on, the profits—that's to say, the income it produces—go in equal shares to you and Mr. Delavigne. If they sell it, and they've got the power to do that, then again, what they get is split equally between the two of you."

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"Can I make them sell it?"

"No one can make them sell it. It's a matter for them. Anyway, it's clear that your husband wanted the school to go on as long as it could. I think that's obvious from the fact that it's the executors who have the right to appoint the headmaster."

Laura sat in silence for an appreciable time. She was chewing over the bitter dish that had been served to her. He could see her mouth moving. Violent forces were working on her. He thought, She's so far off-balance she might do or say anything.

When she spoke, the undercurrent of bile almost choked the words. She said, "You've got it all nicely worked out between you, haven't you? But you're not going to get away with it, I can promise you that. I'll have that will set aside."

"Yes?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! I'll go and see a real solicitor. One who doesn't conspire behind people's backs. We'll see what the Law Society has to say about you, Mr. Tricky Pickett."

Jonas rang the bell on his desk and Claire came in. She said, "Did you want me?"

"You'd better be here. If this lady proposes to slander me again, it would be as well to have a witness present."

Laura left without another word.

Tim Delavigne was standing in the headmaster's study, looking out of the window. Dan's sudden death had shaken the school from top to bottom, but the ship was slowly climbing back onto course again. All the parents had been sympathetic. None of them had wanted to take their boys away. With any luck, he thought, he and Pamela should be able to cope. A car came storming up the drive. Laura Cullingford jumped out and slammed the door behind her.

Tim's feelings toward Laura at that moment were ambivalent. He was sorry for her. The loss of her husband must surely have been a blow. When he had made some such comment to Pamela, she had said nothing. She had neither agreed nor disagreed. In fact, she had been very odd about the whole thing.

Whilst he was thinking, in a puzzled male way, about women and their unfathomable natures, Laura came in. This time she didn't slam the door. She left it open, stalked across to Dan's desk, and sat down behind it.

She said, "I wonder if you'd very much mind asking me before you make free of my study."

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Tim stared at her.

"Until something else is legally and officially decided, I take it that I'm in charge here."

"Yes. I mean—I suppose so. Actually, I thought—"

"Yes, Mr. Delavigne? What did you think?"

"I thought it had been arranged that I should take over."

"Arranged? Arranged by who?"

"Well, by Dan's executors."

"I see. So you're in the plot as well, are you? Well, let me tell you this, Mr. Delavigne. I've been having a word with *my* lawyer. Not *your* lawyer, Grandfather Pickett, but a young Cedric Porter who knows something about the law, and has a few manners into the bargain. I showed him a copy of the will and he said that until the executors had had a meeting and made an appointment, I was in charge. Well?"

"I expect he's right," said Tim. He was seeing a side of Laura that he had never suspected before and wanted only to get out of the room.

"Then perhaps you would be good enough to send Miss Ricketts to see me."

He found Pamela in the Art Room and said, "Laura's in Dan's study. She wants to see you. And, look—I'm afraid she's rather upset. Hardly responsible for what she says. So watch out."

"I'm not afraid of Mrs. Cullingford," said Laura coolly. "She can't kill me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you later. Mustn't keep Madame waiting."

Tim sat down at one of the desks and stared at a well executed painting of three apples on a plate. He was normally courageous enough, but there was something frightening about mental imbalance.

It was five minutes before Pamela reappeared. There was a faint flush across her cheekbones, but otherwise she seemed unruffled.

She said, "Well, you see she didn't kill me."

"What did she want you for? What did she say?"

"She sacked me. I've got to be out by Sunday night."

"Sacked you? She can't do that."

"She seems to think she can."

"What for?"

"I wasn't quite clear about that. Either for impertinence or incompetence. Or maybe for both."

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"This is mad. What are we going to do?"

"I think we must have a word with Mr. Pickett."

"I'll telephone him right away."

Jonas listened carefully to what Tim had to say. He then asked to speak to Pamela, who was the more coherent of the two.

He said, "I can certainly act for you now that Mrs. Cullingford has gone elsewhere. You said it was Cedric Porter she'd seen? He's quite a sensible chap. Better than his old father. I think I'll have a word with him. Which means I shan't be able to see you until later tonight. Could you both get away after supper?"

"We'll do that," said Tim. In fact, the thought of supper with Laura had deprived him of any appetite.

Jonas caught Cedric Porter on the point of slipping away for a round of golf. He said, "If you don't get stuck in too many bunkers you should be back in the clubhouse by seven o'clock. There's a small room behind the bar that no one ever uses. Shall we meet there?"

He thought that Cedric Porter sounded relieved at the idea of a meeting.

"This is off the record?" said Porter.

"Certainly," said Jonas. "Anything said is off the record and totally deniable."

"To tell you the truth, I'm glad to have the chance of discussing it in a friendly way, because it really is a very awkward situation."

"Awkward for everyone," agreed Jonas.

"I've seen the will. I'm assuming that as soon as the executors can meet, they'll use their powers to appoint Delavigne headmaster."

"Yes. You can assume that. Unfortunately, Major Gurney has pushed off with a party of senior boys on some sort of expedition. He won't be back until late on Monday night, so the earliest he and Sambrooke can meet is Tuesday morning. And I'd agree with you that until they meet, Mrs. Cullingford retains a sort of residual authority."

"Yes," said Porter unhappily. "But I did point out to her that anything she does can be reversed as soon as Delavigne takes over."

"What did she say to that?"

"Frankly, I'm not sure she was really listening. I hope she took it in and doesn't do anything stupid. After all, she can't do a lot in three days."

"So far, she's only sacked Miss Ricketts."

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"She's done what?" In his agitation, Porter dropped the golfball he had been fiddling with and it rolled away under the seat.

Jonas retrieved it and handed it back to him. He said, "If I were a psychiatrist, I'd diagnose her trouble as acute persecution mania. The six people who are persecuting her are her late husband, myself, Delavigne, Miss Ricketts, Major Gurney, and Leopold Sambrooke. Dan is out of her reach, but if she could wipe out the other five, she'd do it cheerfully."

"You don't mean—"

"Maybe I was exaggerating. No, I don't think she's reached the homicidal stage, but it wouldn't take much to push her over the edge."

Cedric Porter said, "I trust you're wrong," but he didn't sound very hopeful. "All I can suggest is that we ought to keep in touch, unofficially, until we can see what's going to happen."

"I agree," said Jonas grimly.

When he got back to the office, Tim and Pamela were waiting for him. Sam, Jonas's office factotum, was doing his best to entertain them but without a lot of success. Tim said, "We both cut supper. Couldn't stand the thought of it."

"All right," said Jonas. "Come in and bring me up to date."

"There's not a great deal to report. Laura has spent most of the time in Dan's study with the door locked. Heaven knows what she's up to. She did a lot of telephoning. I think she was trying to get hold of Cedric Porter and was very put out when she discovered he wasn't in the office."

"In a way," said Jonas, "what she's doing is explicable. Grabbing Dan's office for herself and sitting in his chair. She's asserting the position she thinks she ought by rights to have had. What's out of character, Miss Ricketts, is sacking you. She must know she can't make that stick. As soon as Tim's appointed, which will be on Tuesday at the latest, he reappoints you. At least I imagine so."

"At once, if not sooner," agreed Tim.

Pamela said, "The real reason she's trying to get me out of the place is that I was in the gym when her husband died. I didn't actually see what happened because I was busy with some juniors at the other end of the room. I heard a crash and ran up. He must have been trying to climb one of the ropes and fell from nearly the top of it. It wasn't the fall that killed him, Dr. Brassie says, it was

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the effort of climbing. Actually, if you know how to do it, climbing a rope is as easy as walking upstairs. But I don't think he did know."

"Then why did he try to do it?"

"Laura was there. She's made a point lately of coming into my gym classes, and more than once she seemed to be making fun of Dan because he couldn't do everything the boys did. Last week they were going over the vaulting horse and she said, "Even tiny boys can do it—you ought to be setting them an example." Which he did, easily enough. But clearing a vaulting horse isn't the same as climbing a twenty-foot rope."

"Did you actually hear her suggesting that he climb it?"

"No. But she may have thought I did."

"Are you suggesting that she killed her husband?" In the face of this direct question, Pamela hesitated. "It's an awful thing to suggest—but, yes, I think she had the possibility in mind."

"Why? To run the school herself?"

"Not to run it. To sell it."

Jonas thought of what Dan had said to him in this room less than a month ago. He said, "I suppose you realize that there's nothing in all this that adds up to anything like proof. No one could begin to base a charge on it."

"I didn't imagine you could," said Pamela. "Once she's out of the way I'll be happy to forget all about her." She looked at Tim, who smiled his agreement.

"I'm not sure that you *can* get rid of her."

"But—"

"When Tim becomes headmaster, he can stop her from interfering with the school. But that doesn't mean he can turn her out of the house. The law is very protective of widows and their rights in the matrimonial home."

"Let her stay on?" said Tim. "It would be an impossible position for all of us. It just wouldn't work."

"Has it occurred to you that there may be some method in Laura Cullingford's madness? She'll have been told what her legal rights are. If she really can make it impossible for you to carry on, you'd have to sell the place. Which is exactly what she wants."

Tim and Pamela looked at each other. The idea had obviously never occurred to them.

"I may be quite wrong," said Jonas. "Anyway, there's no point in crossing that bridge till we come to it. The next few days are going to be critical. We'd better keep in touch."

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After they had gone, Jonas sat for a long time in his office. In forty years of legal practice he could hardly remember a more difficult situation, or one with more unpleasant possibilities. Suppose what Pamela had suggested was true. Suppose Laura had planned to kill her husband. If so, she had done it in such a way that the law could not touch her.

"Thou shalt not kill," he quoted to himself, "but needst not strive officiously to keep alive."

And what was Laura going to do now? With a woman of her temperament it was impossible to guess, except that it would certainly be unexpected and possibly violent.

The street outside was very quiet. Faintly he heard the clock in the market square striking the hour. Ten o'clock. He'd no idea it was so late. He switched out the light in the office and went upstairs to his flat. Tomorrow was Saturday. Nothing much could happen before Gurney got back. That should at least give them a quiet weekend.

He was still thinking this when the telephone in his bedroom rang at seven o'clock on the following morning.

"Sorry to wake you up," said Superintendent Queen.

"I am awake. I'm just putting on my shoes."

"Good. Well, the fact is, Mr. Pickett, that I think I ought to warn you that you'll be getting your first clients at eight o'clock."

"Who?"

"One of 'em's my son James. T'other's a friend of his at the school, Vincent Sambrooke."

"At Clifton House?"

"Right. They're the two senior boys. In fact, they're leaving at the end of the term. They've both got places at Brighton College."

"Were they the two boys I saw at the funeral standing in front of the bishop?"

"Right. And what I wanted to say is that they're both sensible kids. Much more grown up than I was at their age."

"Children grow up faster now," agreed Jonas. "What do they want to talk about?"

"Jimmy wouldn't tell me."

"Why?"

He heard the Inspector chuckle. "He told me he'd heard me say that if people knew their rights they'd always have a word with their solicitors before saying anything to the police."

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Jonas said, "Good heavens. I hope whatever trouble they're in it's not serious."

"I got the impression," said Queen, "that it wasn't them that was in trouble."

The boys arrived promptly at eight o'clock and sat down in the two chairs Jonas had placed opposite his desk. James looked at Vincent, who was clearly to be the spokesman.

He said, "We've come to report a murder, sir."

"Of whom, by whom?"

Vincent faced this without flinching. He said, "Of Mr. Cullingford, by his wife."

There was a long pause while Jonas made up his mind what to say. Laugh at them? Impossible. Get angry with them? Equally impossible. In the end he simply said, "I suppose you realize that what you're saying is extremely serious?"

Vincent had taken off his glasses to clean them on his handkerchief. Having replaced them, he looked quite steadily at Jonas and said, "Yes, sir. We know it's serious, but it's true. We were in the gym, quite close to where it happened. We both heard Mrs. Cullingford say, "Go on, Dan, be a big man. Show the boys how to do it." We didn't think he wanted to, but she kept at him. She said, "Shall I get Pamela to show you how to do it?" That's Miss Ricketts, sir. That seemed to annoy him, so he took off his coat and started up. Then—but you know about that, sir."

"Yes," said Jonas. "I know about that. If what you're implying is true—and I say *if* because I can see no certainty in it at all—can you think of any reason why she should do such a thing?"

"Oh, we know that, sir," Vincent said.

Jonas stared at him.

"If we didn't know that, we wouldn't have come along. It was what young Russell told us yesterday evening that made us certain we were right. He'd seen Mrs. Cullingford in Mr. Price's BMW. It was parked up a lane near his house, but he could see them quite clearly through the hedge."

"Did he say what they were doing?"

For the first time Vincent seemed to have lost a little of his remarkable poise. He said, "What he said, sir, was that they were snogging."

"And what did he mean by that?"

"He's only eleven," said Vincent apologetically. "I don't think he

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knows a lot about that sort of thing. I mean, it was getting dark and he couldn't see much. What I expect he meant was heavy petting."

Jonas was wondering what a judge and counsel would make of this sort of evidence. He said, "If it was dark, mightn't Russell have been wrong about the car?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Jimmy, speaking for the first time. "He may not know much about sex, but he knows all about cars. He says it was a red four-door six-cylinder BMW 520 with one of those black spoilers. Price is the only man in these parts who's got one of those."

"I see," said Jonas. This sounded a little more like hard evidence. "What about the people in the car? Of course he'd know Mrs. Cullingford, but how did he know the man was Price?"

"He said they'd bought their new house through Price and Westbury. He'd seen Mr. Price talking to his father more than once."

Vincent, who had recovered his poise, said, "Jimmy and I talked it out. We knew Mr. Price had been been shopping round for building land. At one time he asked my father to come in with him on a deal. Dad wasn't keen, because, he told me, he didn't trust Price. But if Mr. Cullingford was out of the way, he could pick up Mrs. Cullingford *and* the land. It seemed quite obvious."

By this time Jonas had decided on the line he must take. He said coldly, "Things may seem obvious in a sort of detective-story way, but we're dealing here with real life. There could be all sorts of explanations for what you've told me. Meanwhile, I'll give you some advice. I imagine you came to me for advice?"

The two boys nodded.

"Then you are to say nothing to anyone until I let you. If you do say anything further about this, you may cause untold harm. You haven't spoken to your fathers?"

Two heads were shaken.

"Good. Then keep your mouths buttoned. You'd better hurry, or you'll be late for school."

As the boys were leaving the office, Vincent said, "Did you see that, Jimmy?"

"No. What?"

"In the BMW. Mr. Price."

"Did he see us?"

"Yes, I think he did. Ten to one he'll sneak to Mrs. Cullingford."

James thought about this as they trotted along. They couldn't stop

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to talk about it. They were going to have their work cut out to get to school in time.

"Don't see she can do much about it," said James. "It isn't as though we'd done anything wrong."

They were a minute late, but scudded up the drive and slipped into their places as the short service which started the day's routine was about to begin.

On Saturdays there were two periods of work followed by a half-hour break at eleven and one more work-hour before lunch. Since no games had been arranged for the afternoon, once lunch was over everyone was free to go home.

It was during the break that the message came round. Everyone was to be in the big schoolroom at half past eleven.

"Does everyone mean us?" said the visiting master who taught mathematics.

"Apparently not," said Tim. "Just the boys."

The master said, "Good show." He himself had no further class to take and was planning to catch the 11:40 to London. "What's it all about, anyway?"

"No idea. Orders from the head lady."

The boys shuffled into the schoolroom and sat down. Laura mounted the platform where the master's desk stood and stared down at them. She was breathing heavily, as though she had been running. There was a white patch along each cheekbone.

She said, "Sambrooke and Queen, come out here."

The two boys came and stood in front of the desk.

"You were both late for prayers this morning."

"I thought we were just in time, Mrs. Cullingford," said Jimmy.

"There's no such thing as being just in time. Either you're in time or you're late."

"Yes, Mrs. Cullingford."

"What made you late?"

Price *has* sneaked, thought Jimmy. Now for it. He said, "I had a message from my father for Mr. Pickett."

"A message? Why couldn't your father have delivered it himself?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Cullingford."

Laura stepped off the platform and stood beside Jimmy. She said through her teeth, "I think you're lying."

"I'm not lying, Mrs. Cullingford. You can ask my father. He knew I was going there."

"I've no doubt he'll support any lies you choose to tell. But you're

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not going to get away with it." She swung her right arm, hand open, and hit him in the face. She was a powerful woman and the blow was so unexpected that Jimmy toppled over sideways, clutched at one of the legs of the desk, and pulled it down on top of himself. It came with a splintering crash, spilling books, rulers, and an open inkpot from which a black lake spread slowly onto the planks.

Laura took no further notice of him. She moved across to Vincent, who guessed what was coming and whipped his glasses off. Her open hand hit him on the side of the face. Since he was ready for it, he didn't fall down but stood staring at her blankly. She hit him again, and then again.

The rest of the school stood watching her in horrified silence.

It was just after half past two that same afternoon when Superintendent Queen and Leopold Sambrooke arrived together at Jonas's office. They were both very angry. They told Jonas what had happened, supplementing each other, and adding to each other's fury.

"Vincent's got a badly split lip and the doctor thinks he may have a cracked cheekbone."

"Jimmy's had to have six stitches in a long tear in his scalp. That was when the desk fell on him."

"They're both pretty shocked I can tell you."

"They weren't the only ones who were shocked. A lot of the smaller boys were so scared they wouldn't even stay for school lunch. They scuttled straight off home."

"There are no two ways about it," said Sambrooke, "that woman ought to be in an institution, under proper restraint."

"And what we want to know," said Queen, "is what we can do about it. Because we're not letting her get away with it."

"That's right," said Sambrooke. "What's the position? The legal position?"

"Well," said Jonas, "Mrs. Cullingford was standing in temporarily as headmaster. The law about schoolmasters isn't entirely clear, but it's generally accepted that they have the right to give their pupils moderate punishment."

"Moderate," said Sambrooke viciously. "A fractured cheekbone and a broken head for being one minute late for school?"

"Only it seems that wasn't their real offense," said Queen.

"What was it, then?"

"Coming to visit you."

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"I see," said Jonas. "Yes, I thought I saw that BMW parked outside. Price must have seen them leaving."

"Look here," said Sambrooke. "What we want—"

Jonas held up one hand.

"I know what you want," he said. "And please don't misunderstand me. Of course what Mrs. Cullingford did couldn't be justified under any code of law. It was sheer spiteful rage—a totally unwarranted attack, in front of a hundred witnesses. No court would tolerate it. But the real point is this. If a case were brought, which court would be hearing it?"

The two angry men stared at him. Queen seemed to have some idea what he was getting at.

Jonas said, "If Mrs. Cullingford was not in a position of authority—I mean, if she had just come up to a strange boy in the street and had done what she did to your boys—the right course would be a simple charge of criminal assault. First offense. She would probably be bound over. You follow me?"

Queen said, "Yes." Sambrooke was too angry to speak.

"But where someone exceeds—grossly exceeds—an imagined right, the proper course is a civil action, which would certainly result in her being forced to pay costs and heavy damages."

"Let's hit her where it hurts most," agreed Queen.

"Quite so. The trouble is that a civil action takes time. Certainly months—maybe years."

"That's impossible," said Sambrooke. "She can't be left in that school for another day. She's not safe."

Queen, who knew Jonas better than Sambrooke did, said, "You've got some idea, haven't you, Mr. Pickett?"

"Yes," said Jonas. "I'm not sure whether it's a good one or a bad one."

He talked to them for some minutes, then said, "It's going to mean a lot of hard work for you. And you'll have to move quickly. You've only got this afternoon and tomorrow."

"You can do a lot in a day and a half if you give your mind to it," said Queen. "One thing, we shan't have to waste much time over explanations."

Sambrooke said, "Might be a good idea to get the Press in on it. Sammy Clayton's father is sub-editor of the *South Coast Gazette and News*. It publishes biweekly, on Tuesdays and Fridays."

"Tuesday," said Jonas thoughtfully. "Yes, that should be about right . . ."

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At the school that morning, Tim—who had heard the crash of the desk going over—had hurried into the room. He had almost been knocked over by Laura sweeping out. He silenced the shrill babble of explanations and said to one of the visiting masters who had come in with him, "Can you look after everyone for half an hour, Alex? Keep them all in here. I'm going to get these two boys home."

When Tim got back to the school, Alex said, "Am I glad to see you! I had to lock the door to keep half of them from running away."

Tim said, "Does anybody *not* want to stop for lunch?"

A dozen hands went up—mostly boys who lived within walking distance of the school. He said, "All right, off you go."

Lunch was a madhouse, with everyone talking so excitedly they could hardly find time to eat. "A pity," said Pamela. "Cook always makes a special effort for Saturday lunch."

Laura did not put in an appearance.

When it was over, the boys dispersed, some on foot, some on bicycles. A few more were collected by their parents. Tim could see them beginning to talk before the car doors were shut, the words coming out like bubbles in a cartoon. "Mummy, do you know what Mrs. Cullingford—"

When the last of them had gone, Pamela said, "What are you planning to do?"

"I'll tell you what I'm *not* going to do," said Tim, "and that is hang about here waiting for the storm to break. I thought we might run over to Brighton. We'll have dinner there and get back late."

"So you're running away?"

"Right," said Tim.

He had a word with Annie, the more sensible of the two housemaids who lived in. He said, "I expect there'll be a lot of messages, people asking particularly to talk to me. Could you just make a note of the calls and say I'll ring back first thing tomorrow. Leave the notes in the letter rack in the staffroom."

Annie looked doubtful, but promised to do her best.

Tim and Pamela spent a peaceful afternoon, sitting in the sun on Brighton Pier and resolutely refusing to discuss school matters. They had a good meal and a glass of wine at the Albion Hotel and, thus fortified, drove back to Clifton House. There was a chink of light from the window in the headmaster's study, but otherwise the building was in darkness. They went in by the back door and Tim made his way to the staffroom.

There was a single sheet of paper in the letter rack.

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It was in Annie's schoolgirl handwriting. It said, "Ten P.M. No messages so far."

They stared at each other in disbelief.

Over Sunday the mystery deepened. The telephone was silent. No one came to the house. Laura confined herself to her own quarters. Tim and Pamela went for a walk over the downs behind Shackleton, had a combined tea and supper in a village pub, and once again got home after dark. Still no messages.

"The trouble's going to start when the boys get here tomorrow," said Tim. "I don't mean Jimmy and Vincent. They may still be under doctor's orders. It's the other boys. They'll have had time to tell their parents all about it."

"And the story," said Pamela, "will have lost nothing in the telling."

The members of the visiting staff who were involved in Monday's program turned up in good time and joined Tim and Pamela in the main classroom. Laura did not normally attend prayers. The service, a brief and interdenominational one, had been conducted since Dan Cullingford's death by Tim. The science master played the piano, badly. Everyone was ready. There was only one thing missing. There were no boys.

After ten minutes, it became clear that this was not a question of lateness. It was mass desertion.

Tim wasn't sure whether he was worried or relieved. On the whole, relief predominated. Whatever happened now, this was going to bring things to a head. He wondered who had organized it.

He sent the visiting staff home and went straight to have it out with Laura. From her vantage point in the study, she must have been able to observe what was happening.

She said, "Is this something to do with you?"

"Certainly not."

"Then what—?"

"The fact is," said Tim brutally, "that you've frightened the boys so badly that their parents won't let them come to school. I don't blame them. What you did was cruel and totally uncalled for."

For a moment he thought she was going to explode, but the spirit was out of her. She said plaintively, "What are we going to do? What *can* we do?"

"The first thing," said Tim, who was looking out of the window, "is to deal with the Press. Isn't that Giles Clayton, from the *Gazette?*

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His son's in the school. No doubt that's why he's first in the field. I expect there'll be others. Are you going to talk to them?"

"No," said Laura wildly; "I can't. I wouldn't know what to say. You must do it. After all, by tomorrow you'll probably be headmaster."

"If there's any school for me to be headmaster of."

"What are you going to tell them?"

"The truth," said Tim, and went out.

In fact, Giles Clayton was their only visitor. He listened to what Tim had to tell him and said, "Yes, that's more or less what Sammy told me. It's pretty bad for the school, isn't it? I could tone it down a bit, perhaps."

Tim had already made his mind up about that. He said, "Don't tone it down at all. Tell the whole story."

The *South Downs News* and the *South Coast Times*, both of which were weeklies, telephoned later that afternoon. Their interest in the story was diminished by the fact that the *Gazette* was clearly ahead of them. In any event, by the time they came out on Friday the story would be public property.

Laura's nerve did not finally break until Tuesday morning. The story was on the front page of the *Gazette* under a full-size headline: THE SCHOOLBOYS WHO DARE NOT GO TO SCHOOL. Thinking about it had been bad. Reading the story in cold print was intolerable. It led her to take a step which if she had been in full control of herself she would have known to be unwise. She telephoned Derek Price at his office.

At first there seemed to be some difficulty about putting her through. Finally she lost her temper with his secretary and said, "If he doesn't ring me back in five minutes I'm coming round in person." Almost as soon as she had put down the receiver, the telephone rang. Price sounded cool. He said, "From what I've seen in this morning's paper, it looks as though you're in trouble."

Laura said, "We've got to talk about this. Now. This morning."

Price said, "It wouldn't be very sensible to meet in public. People might start to imagine things." Laura said nothing, but he had no difficulty in visualizing the state she was in. Like an unexploded bomb, he thought. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll drive out to the school. The back entrance. Meet you there. Then we can drive up onto the downs and talk this over."

Half an hour later, they were parked in a lay-by from which they

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could look down on Shackleton, its roofs shining under the clear November sun.

Laura said, "We planned to get married as soon as we could after Dan's death. As soon as public opinion would stand for it, was what you said. Well, after what's happened I'm past worrying about public opinion. I've got to get away from here, and I'm not going alone. If we got a special license we could be married in a month."

When Derek said nothing she added, "Couldn't we?"

He said, "I'm very fond of you. And I don't want to sound mercenary. But things are a bit different now."

"Different?"

"Well, when we made the arrangement I understood that after Dan's death the school would be yours. Now it seems you've only got a half share of what it fetches when it's sold."

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye to see how she was taking this. She seemed to be taking it surprisingly well. She said, "Cedric Porter told me about that. There are institutions who buy these things. It's called a settled reversion. It could be sold now for quite a reasonable sum."

"I expect that's right," said Price. "But there's something else. The buzz is that the fathers of both the boys you hit are planning to sue you. When you'd paid damages and costs there mightn't be much left of what you got for your share in the school."

Derek stole another glance at her face. She seemed to be taking it all very calmly. If he had been shrewder, he would have looked at her hands. Those traitors were clasping and unclasping themselves.

Halfway down the steep hill into Shackleton, she leaned across, grabbed the wheel, and twisted it.

"I'm not sure what she meant to do," said Major Gurney. "Perhaps she was trying to kill them both. If that was her idea, it didn't work. She hit a telegraph pole and turned the car over. Price got off comparatively lightly. Broke an arm and three ribs. She cracked her skull and will be in hospital for months."

It was a fortnight after the accident and the Major had called on Jonas for a further discussion on income tax.

Jonas said, "R. and L. Sykes have already had instructions. Price is going the whole hog. Not just damages. He wants a charge of attempted murder. She'll wriggle out of that. She'll say it was an accident. Her word against his."

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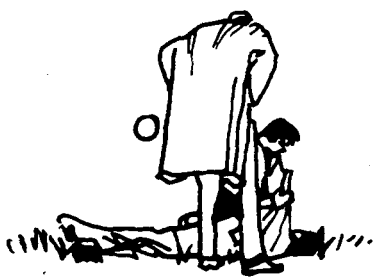
"Whether she wriggles out of it or not," said the Major, "it's quite clear she can't come back to the school."

"How are they doing?"

"They're fine. I took our football team down to play them yesterday and we got walloped. Sambrooke and Queen scored two goals each."



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BRINGING THE POINT HOME

by HILDA WIGDER

"Writing a mystery's as easy as pie."
That ruffled my feathers—I said, "That's a lie!
Research can be difficult, fair clues must be rife—
Only good plots and shrewd people bring crime to life.
The selection of words requires much care,
And you say it's easy—go on if you dare!"
And when he proceeded to say it again,
I decided to stop him right there and then.
I reached out and zapped him with his weighty tome,
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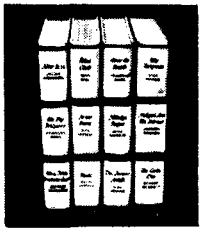

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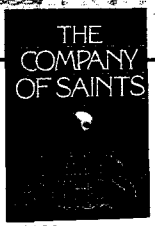

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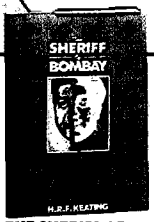

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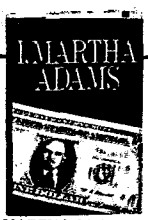

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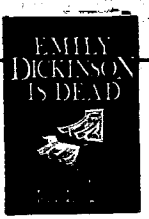

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